

Greater Consciousness and Greater Love

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

September 1, 2024, Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 115; James 1: 17-22, 25-27

“Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For everything that rises must converge.” *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*

“The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.... The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger.” *Frederick Buechner, from Wishful Thinking*

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

The two quotes in the bulletin show both the challenge of building “a loving community that includes all” and the path that can overcome the challenges.

Fred Buechner talks about our diverse callings driven by listening to our innermost truth, but our unique vocations each turn out to serve what the Spirit and earth most need, which is the beloved community.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin talks about moving toward greater consciousness and greater love, and says it is the path to oneness, but there are different paths up that mountain.

The challenge is that down below the summit some levels of consciousness don’t understand or approve of other paths and don’t get along. Jesus and those who have attained his summit of consciousness call us up the mountain path and model for us the unconditional compassion and love that we need in order to walk together in our diversity.

In this church we try to practice building that loving community by extending our care and support to all, reaching out especially to those we don't know well and those who seem different from us, so that we may all be one. Please follow that path up the mountain to deep gladness again today.

Call to Worship It was a remarkable month while I was away!

The Creative Nursery took a leap forward with new fire doors, our Fulfilling Our Vision committee had two speakers on what is at stake in the election, our Mission Committee used their fund to promote justice and peace and the Deacons used their fund to help local people, and we had four wonderful Seeking Spirit services that I was able to attend thanks to our video technology.

The services featured two very different 20th Century thinkers, a white European Jesuit who was a leading scientist and ground-breaking theologian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and a black, gay American preacher turned famous novelist, social commentator and activist, James Baldwin. Herbert Goertz challenged us to consider what faith means, and Rachel Guaraldi led us through a spiritual practice based on faith in the guiding light within us each.

All these things, from nursery fire doors to faithful actions and reflections, beautifully portray what it is to be a church. When I say, "Let us worship together," I mean let us open our hearts and minds in faith to the Spirit that is moving within and among us in so many good ways. So let us worship together...

Greater Consciousness and Greater Love

Jesuit theologian and scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, "Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For everything that rises must converge."

The wisdom of those forty words stands as a mission statement for all spiritual traditions.

Remain true to yourself. Christianity, like every other religion, exists to help us be our true self as opposed to the self formed by ego selfishness or unhealed wounds or conformity to social pressures.

Move toward greater consciousness. Over and over the Hebrew and Christian scriptures call us to expand our minds and see with the eyes of God or mind of Christ and attain a new understanding of reality and greater wisdom. The reading in James calls us to look into the laws of the universe and every spiritual and philosophical tradition does the same.

Move toward greater love. As James puts it, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.... Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is like this: to care for orphan children and single mothers in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world of selfishness and greed.” In other words, our enlightened consciousness needs to bear fruits of a love that is ever greater in how inclusive it is, and how compassionate and unselfish. Again, every major religion has the Golden Rule at the center of its ethic and calls people to that summit of love.

Teilhard says that when we climb the mountain of ever greater consciousness and love, we find at the summit that we are one with all others who have arrived at the same place from all directions. People of all traditions at the highest level of consciousness see the true oneness of all people and all creation. People at the highest level of love, seeing all are one, finally truly love their neighbor as their own self, and discover that there is no person or creature or corner of the universe that is not their neighbor.

It is crucial to the survival of life on earth that we keep climbing toward that social and environmental ethic. We should never think to ourselves, well, I’m as high up the mountain as I can get. People sometimes attain that summit of consciousness and love on their deathbeds because they spent their lives steadily climbing toward it.

It is also crucial that we understand that we can move down the mountain as well as up, and to see why it matters so much which way we go.

Think of a wild, irresponsible rich boy who gets arrested for heroin possession, who does enforced community service with an environmental organization and goes on to win some significant accomplishments to protect the earth. His actions reflect a consciousness and love bigger than his own ego pleasures and ambitions. But then one day when his ego feels slighted and ambitions thwarted, he turns and joins the side of a candidate who calls climate change a hoax and promises to overturn environmental regulations. The man’s consciousness and love plunge down the mountainside and threaten to take with them the health of all people and all the earth.

Or consider a lifelong hunter and soldier who leaves the military to become a politician. The National Rifle Association gives him its highest ranking. But then one horrific school shooting after another happens, and this man, who had also been a school teacher and coach, sees that something must be done to reduce gun violence and feels moved to make it happen. He supports modest proposals for gun control and the National Rifle Association drops him from its highest ranking to its lowest, a sure sign that he has climbed the mountain to greater consciousness and greater love, unselfishly risking his political career for the sake of saving innocent lives.

“Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent.”

We are undertaking a planning process in our congregation—the Church Council has appointed a planning committee that will meet for the first time this week. I suspect that whatever vision of our next five years emerges, it will be consistent with this vision of Teilhard’s. I suspect this will continue to be a place where we seek to nurture our true selves and rise to greater consciousness, and where we seek ways to join with others who are moving up the same mountain on different paths and together do works of love, as we have in the last month including our joint service with the Unitarian-Universalist congregation.

But today a Christian church like ours faces a huge problem. When we follow the path toward greater consciousness and greater love, we see with greater clarity how much harm Christians do when they are at lower levels of consciousness and love, when they fail to see the true oneness of all people and creatures on this fragile planet, when their consciousness considers their neighbor to be only those who believe and think and act and vote as they do, and their love extends only to those neighbors in their group.

We see churches populated with Christian nationalists, people who deny LGBTQ+ rights or people who hope for the war of Armageddon in the Middle East and the destruction of the earth because those are signs of the second coming of Christ. It has become increasingly difficult for people who have more expansive consciousness to set foot in even a progressive Christian church.

And yet anyone who is intentional about climbing toward greater consciousness and greater love knows that we need the support of others along that path. We need those who are up ahead of us to send back the wisdom they have gained, we need the inspiration of beautiful words, music and spiritual practices, we need the comfort of fellow travelers when the going is hard, we need to hear that we are forgiven when we fall, we need circle conversations to consider together how to help this world live as one, in harmony with all people and all the earth.

We can see troubles approaching right now that will make greater consciousness and greater love even more important and even harder for fearful, hurting people to attain, so we can see that more than ever we need places like churches where people gather to walk together on this crucial path.

And the higher we climb up the mountain, the more we want to be together with those coming up by other paths.

So how can we shape our church as a place where that can happen?

I fully believe the answers will come if we stay true to ourselves and continue moving toward greater consciousness and greater love—if we listen to the inner word of the Spirit and are not just hearers, but doers of that word.

Let us pray together a listening prayer in silence...

Communion Invitation

This ritual is meant to inspire
the greater consciousness
that leads to greater love.

Sharing these common elements
tells us that we are one with all people, including
neighbors, strangers and even enemies.

It says we are one with the earth
and all that lives and grows on it,
symbolized by these grains and grapes.

This ritual reminds us to love others
as our own self,
to make the best interest of the other
our own self-interest,
until there is no separate other,
there is only us, standing at the summit

of this holy hill together.
This ritual lifts us to the consciousness and love
of the Hebrew Prophets and the Buddha
and Lao Tzu and Native American wisdom keepers
and Gandhi and Dorothy Day and Jesus,
all climbing the same mountain
from different directions.
The body and blood of Christ in this ritual
stand for all who have dedicated
their body and blood to the way of love.
Let us join our lives together now as friends
each climbing our own path toward the summit
with our body and blood and every breath,
so that we and all earth may be one.

Haiku by Mel. Goertz

Teilhard teaches us to see,
to unite with the Love
all around us.