

Gates Presbyterian Church

Celebrating Anyway

February 2, 2025

Friends...

I'm going to do something a little bit different today. It's been quite a week in many ways and I think we need to take a minute and breathe.

How is everyone doing?

Feel free to call out some one word answers to that question.

The last few days have felt like a rollercoaster to me, and perhaps you have felt the same way. I have been hearing from people in our community and around the city who are fearful, outraged, discouraged and overwhelmed. For followers of Jesus we have been challenged deeply to think about what we believe and decide how that belief will guide our actions and our work.

I find myself returning to Martin Luther King Jr.'s words from my sermon a couple of weeks ago. I am sticking with love. Hate is too big a burden to bear.

But it is challenging to know what love looks like in the face of a weaponized fear and hatred intent on harming people who are different or vulnerable – refugees, immigrants, poor, disabled, queer, female, uninsured.

Jesus teaches us to love by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and welcoming the stranger. Now more than ever, this is how we follow Jesus. This is how we love. And as we pursue these things, we also advocate for those whose voices have been silenced, we amplify their calls for a response of compassion that upholds human dignity and meets the basic needs we all share.

Now it is much easier to love when things around us are calm, when we exist in communities where kindness and compassion are uppermost and generosity is the word of the day. So much harder to love when others are actively pursuing pathways that intentionally harm. So much harder to love when the ones committing these unkind acts profess themselves to be Christians. So much harder to love when you feel angry or afraid.

Harder. But not impossible. Jesus shows us part of how to respond in today's gospel, and Paul reminds us of the attributes of love and how important that love is as the anchor to every other gift we have been given, and the filter through which we use those talents and resources.

This morning, we listen as Jesus gets in trouble in his hometown because he warns the people that this good news of freedom and release and new sight is not only for the Israelites but for all people. His neighbors have already seen what he can do and perhaps were hoping he would focus on their needs as the most important ones because he knows them the best. Instead, Jesus provokes them by reminding them of past prophets who overlook the chosen ones to focus on the outsiders, the foreigners, the strangers instead.

When the respectful crowd of last week's synagogue congregation becomes an unruly mob intent on throwing Jesus off a cliff, he merely walks back through the crowd and proceeds on his way – presumably to continue his work of proclaiming the good news. He does not engage those people who throw their anger in his face. He does not try to justify himself or further explain. He simply refuses to participate in the chaos they are creating and he boldly leaves the area.

Jesus later teaches all those who will listen that their work is to love God and love neighbor. And Paul further explains what that love looks like in true followers of Jesus. It is patient and kind. It does not insist on its own way. It is not envious or boastful or rude. It is not irritable. It does not keep a record of wrongs.

If I speak but do not have love, says Paul, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.

And what a lot of gongs and symbols we have heard this week.

But, if we listen carefully, beneath the chaos and the fear and the outrage and the discouragement, the voice of love continues to speak. I heard it this week in so many ways:

In the generous and willing help that so many offered as we move through this transition period following the unexpected loss of our office staff. I am so grateful for the generosity of spirit I have witnessed everywhere I turned to ask for help. What a beautiful and committed community this is!

I have heard love in the many who have responded to the proposed funding freeze by taking action to speak out against the harm such a move would cause, to provide resources for those who were facing a sudden cessation of the housing and food support the government had promised, to attend meetings to learn about what we can do to support those directly affected by sweeping plans to cut funding for vulnerable neighbors and split families through deportation orders.

I heard it in the conversations of medical professionals and family as I walked with someone who has a serious illness.

If you are wondering – what do we do in this moment, I think the only answer is that we love. Boldly. Courageously. Out loud. As allies and supporters and people of faith who believe each person is made in God’s image.

Today, following worship, we will receive our 2024 Annual Report and so I want to take this moment to remind us that we are already doing this work of love, to celebrate all the ways we loved our neighbors as ourselves last year and to find in that review the energy and hope needed to continue on into this year.

So – following, is my extremely incomplete list of ways our community experienced love last year. I share them in no particular order and will invite you at the end to add your own items.

In the area of feeding the hungry –

- this congregation prepared and delivered 3,800 lunches for St. Joe’s and 1,238 weekend food bags for our local school children – a total of \$22,000 worth of mostly donated food items and countless hours of volunteered time in packing and delivering the bags themselves.
- We supported the SWEM food cupboard where members of our congregation volunteer regularly in the cupboard itself, and participate as board members, by staffing the monthly food ingathering, and by contributing Christmas baskets.
- A team of GPCers participated in the annual Grocery Run, earning several hundred dollars to support our various feeding ministries and joining people from around the city in raising awareness around issues of hunger.

In the area of our More Light work –

- A group of our members participated in the Pride Parade celebrating the beautiful way God made every single person in God’s image
- The Dykes family led a beautiful Pride Sunday worship showing us what it looks like to love our queer neighbors.

In the area of welcoming the stranger –

- We welcomed the El Shaddai Church into our community, celebrating worship together and sharing a meal and recruiting volunteers to support the tutoring ministry that has now begun for children in the El Shaddai community
- We continued to advocate for our Churchview Commons apartment complex, celebrated its full financing and, in December, rejoiced in the beginning of work to

build 45 units of one and two bedroom housing for those in our community who need a safe place to live that they can also afford.

- We continued to host multiple 12 step and grief groups, offering people a place to gather where they can find support, unconditional love and a sense of hope and encouragement.

In the area of worship –

- We enjoyed almost monthly music from our children, lifting our spirits with their messages of hope and kindness and love.
- We celebrated jazz Sunday, Music Sunday, the Kirkin' of the Church, multiple special services and the many special talents of our choir under the direction of Andy and Roy along with the many musicians who contributed their various talents over the course of the year.
- We celebrated the lives of many who mattered deeply to our community, showing our love for them, recognizing their love for us and remembering together all the ways they showed us how to love one another.
- We enjoyed the teaching and special services led by volunteers in our community – Tom, Adam, Carrie, Gary, Sam, Roy and Jim.

In the area of mission –

- We received the deeply generous gift of Nancy Olsen's house the proceeds from the sale of which the session has set aside as a resource for the new ministry and mission we expect to pursue.
- Adam Switzer and Tom Ward journeyed to Guatemala to learn about and bear witness to the suffering experienced there.
- Our mission team distributed ten percent of our income to support ministries addressing a multitude of diverse challenges from addiction and recovery to homelessness and hunger; from overseas missionaries to local nonprofits supporting the recently incarcerated, the homeless, the hungry, and the newly arrived; and from disaster relief to clothing drives.

In the area of pastoral care –

- Our deacons continued to engage in a ministry of presence, showing up for all of us through their card ministry, in person visits, support for funerals, meal trains and preparing our coffee hour every week.

- We continued to walk with the many families who have experienced loss this year, sitting in this suffering to remember and cry, laugh and be thankful as we moved through the seasons without those who were so important to us.
- Our knitting team has continued to make scarves and hats for our homeless neighbors and prayer shawls for all those who need a little extra love and attention.

In the area of ecclesial health

- Our finance team continues to lead the way, managing a fruitful and enjoyable generosity campaign and guiding us in the best ways to steward our financial resources and make them available for the ministry and mission we engage in.
- Our Trustees continued to care for the building and connect with our building users, contributing their time and talent to show the community a love embodied in a safe, warm, dry space that can contain all of the work I mentioned above – and lots more besides.

I have no doubt that I have missed many wonderful things. I invite you to share a few of them now.

It's quite a list of ways we have loved our neighbors and I wanted to stop and consider all that work as we get ready to dive into a new year that already looks like it will hold more need than we would have imagined. Certainly, we are facing a period where there is a lot of energy and power being put behind policies that will harm the most vulnerable among us. There is increasing need for bold action to counter narratives that focus on revenge, blame, fear, anger and resentment. There is increasing need for voices that speak love, peace, patience, kindness, humility and mercy into the world.

We know that God is going to show up in all of these places. We must trust that the Spirit will guide us as we gather together to discern loving responses, and as we advocate deeply for those in need without being drawn into a narrative of fear and hatred.

Love, as Paul reminds us, never ends. While prophecies will come to an end, tongues will cease and we will see only partially what God has planned, faith, hope and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

Beloved, let us love one another, as Christ has loved us.