Welcome:

Good Morning,

And welcome to worship with Hiram Christian Church.

We are a congregation striving to follow Christ in the ways of love,
Striving to cultivate a community of belonging,
And striving to do our part of restorative justice in the world.

Whoever you are,
And wherever you are on life's most holy journey,
You are welcome,
And you belong,
Here.

Welcome Church

This morning we gather to sing and to pray,
To be nourished at the table and within this community,
And today, we come to renew our commitments to God and one another.

Just over two years ago, this church voted to become an Open and Affirming Congregation within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),
It was the faithful response to a faithful process of prayer, conversation, and discernment.

And we have recognized this guidance of the Spirit in our common life as something that is worthy of our celebration -
For what it means within this congregation and broader community,
For the formal expansion of the gospel,

And something that requests a commitment from us -
Recognizing that the vote is just the beginning of the response,
And recognizing that because of our faithful response to God's call,
God just might lead us to some new and unexpected places…

And so we gather today to celebrate what God has done,

To re-commit ourselves to this radical welcome and inclusive love of the gospel,

And re-commit ourselves as servants - seeking to continue the good work and be open to new forms of service for God's beloved.

Welcome Church,
Exactly as you are.

Would you please rise in stance and/or in spirit and join me in the call to worship?

Call to Worship:

Prayers of the People:

We bring our whole hearts into prayer,
Trusting that our God and this congregation are great enough to welcome and receive it all,

Caring enough to meet us and accompany us.

This is a time for prayer for the self, our communities, and our world.

Nancy - PET Scan - for Dave.
Anne - Storytellers - Friday night gathering
Jane - Others who are waiting
Peace - peaceful ending to Iran.
Good faith
Adam - decency in public life.
Margaret - son of a friend - suffering from interrupting
Seth.
MRI - friday - anciety;
Megan - Family grieving.

Children's Sermon:

Basket and _____

Scripture: I John 4.7-12

Sermon: Theory and Practice

There is this beautiful poem from the Sufi, Ahmad Ghazali,
Entitled
Not This, Not That
Both This and That

And it reads,

I will write you a book on Radical Love
provided you do not bifurcate it
into Divine Love
and Human Love

We could just sit with that for a long while…

I will write you a book on Radical Love
provided you do not bifurcate it
into Divine Love
and Human Love

That's where we're headed.

It is so simple,
And there is no shortage of ways that we can complicate it.

Early after grad school, I was in a conversation with the Reverend Bob Harris,
We were talking about theology and we started talking about the image of God -
What is your image of God?
Who is God?

And this was such a worthy conversation for me -
I believe I had shared the part of my faith story that is a long season of "deconstruction."

"Deconstruction" is the more recent and gentler term for engaging the questions and doubts,

And it is likely a more apt description of what it is for most of us - wrestling with our experience of God like Jacob;

"The dark night of the soul."

Before finding the word, "deconstruction," I had previously described this period of time in my life as "seven years of falling into the abyss."

So, we all have our journeys…

(God was like, "One night is not going to be enough for this guy.")

Looking back, it was like that portion of time when the Israelites wandered in the wilderness -

It wasn't necessarily because they were lost,

But that time was needed as a detoxification from empire…

Room was needed for something more.

And so even after four years of study at Hiram,

Three years of study at Emory,

I was still deconstructing and reconstructing…

(still am)

So when he asked me about my image of God,

I knew what I had left behind,

And so I told him,

I don't think God is judgmental or condemning.

It was that thing when you know more of what something isn't than what something is…

Like when you try to describe a duckbill platypus…

Well, I think it's not a duck…

It's not a groundhog…

But this scripture, I John, was what I could turn to and trust in…

So I told him,

"I think that God is a loving God."

And he took it in and smiled,
Ah, God is love.

I agreed.
And I went on to describe what I did and did not believe about God -
All about the character of God.

And then I asked him the question he asked me,
What's your image of God?
Who is God?

He answered with a clarity that I did not hear at first,
God is love.

And then he went on,
God is the love between you and your family;
God is the love between you and your neighbor;
God is the love in your heart, just waiting to be born and given life…

And click.

I realized,
That every time that I had read this,
I had been thinking and imagining that this is about the character of God

That God is a loving God
A god that is still quite removed and distant,
But one that is somewhere up in the heavens lovingly gazing upon us…

And there's a lot of good there,

But here,

John,
And Ahmad Ghazali
And Bob

Are all saying…

This isn't just about the character of God;
This is about the form and shape and life of God.

Where there is love,
There is God,
To echo Paul and the Latin chant and song, Ubi Caritas…

But it's not like God is watching, approving of the love granted…

God is the love within and between all things…

I had complicated,
And bifurcated it…
Thinking that God was love,
And we have love.
And it's two stories, not just one.

But the invitation is to make it whole.

I share this for two reasons.

The first is that I think it's a suitable lens to look out upon the Church in our time and place.

There is a not insignificant number of Churches and denominations who continue to complicate and bifurcate,
Such that they can proclaim a God who is loving…
But the quality of this love is wholly unto God
It is extended with great selection -
God loves those who love God
and more importantly it seems,
That God loves those who believe a certain way
Who live and act a certain way

The greatest act of love that these churches can proclaim is that God might not condemn you if you conform to a set of norms. (Thanks?)

That image of God -
And that image of love -
Even if it makes its way from heaven to earth
Is just so small and twisted…

It often does more to divide than to unite;
More to wound than to heal;

This, for the moment, is the dominant view within the Church in America.

There was a survey that was published this last week by the Public Religion Research Institute on Empathy and Religion.

Did you see this?

It asked for responses to two particular statements from Americans - of all faiths and no particular faith -

The first statement was:

Empathy is a foundational value that helps build a moral society.

And the survey found that among White Evangelicals,
Only 42% agreed with the statement.

Among White Mainliners such as ourselves,
73% agreed with the statement.

Pat yourself on the back.

But here's what's even more fascinating.

Among those who have no affiliation with religion whatsoever,
83% agreed.

Statistically speaking, the non-religious are more empathetic than the religious,
And particularly the dominant wing of the Church.

And this is just empathy -
The ability to sense and recognize pain -

Imagine if the survey asked about “love”?

The second statement the survey asked folks to address was,

“Empathy can become dangerous when it leads people away from building a society guided by God’s truth.”

Just over half of the white evangelical responses strongly agreed with the statement.

It is so very possible to have scripture that reads, “God is Love”
And to attribute that to a character of God,
And then discount and dismiss the mere sentiment of compassion between us.

Church, what we proclaim here,
Matters.

The second reason for this today is for us to recognize, remember, and recommit ourselves to put any theology,
Scripture,
Or mystic poetry into practice.

Just as it is possible to believe God is love and then dismiss your neighbor,
So it is possible to believe God is the love between us all,
And still kind of keep it close to the vest.

It is easy to read the news,
And read of cruelty in the world.
In places so close to home,
And this can make us feel intimidated -
It can feel as though there is a risk to stand out with love.

There is a cruelty manifesto of scapegoating and dehumanization coming straight from the top,
And some folks pick it up and start throwing it around our communities…
And we see it flood the airwaves in campaign ads

And it hits our neighbors,
Our families,
Us…

And we know, right…
If you hear your name called in the targeting,
And see your image in the fearmongering,
And find yourself at the center of attention when all you want is to be who you know God has created and calls you to be…
And live your life…

It is punishing
To know of your citizenship and rights to representation and membership;
And to have those entrusted to serve and protect
Target you for political gain;

And to have faith communities cheer them on and sanctify it with quotes from the bible…

It is punishing and isolating…

It is not nearly enough,
But it can be a godsend to have a congregation - a community who knows and says something good and true.

It can be a godsend to hear and know that you are created in the image of God.
And that God loves you for who you are,
And know that there's no asterisk and separate list of terms and conditions.

But again, that's just a beginning.

God is not just a loving God.
God is love.
God is a love willing and able to risk itself to be known.

Church,
What you have done in making the commitment to become an open and affirming congregation within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a radical, beautiful, and faithful decision.

You have proclaimed that God is Love
And not just that love is the character of God, but the form and shape of God -
Wherever love is, God is.

The work that you have done in discernment and in response to this commitment -
The symbol, word, and spirit of this inclusive love is manifest in this place and in the stories we tell about this church.

And,
This commitment still has more invitation for us -

To continue to listen for what God is calling us into,
To continue to pray and imagine how we might make this love known,
To continue to practice - in our individual and common life - the faith that we hold…

Because the non-religious and religious landscapes are what they are;

And because the Church is still uncomplicating the understanding that God is love;

And most importantly - because there are members of our communities who have been targeted and harassed and made to feel that they should not belong in our communities and even in their very own bodies… and that they should not love who they love - even though it is God that is between them…

Let us have the courage to risk extending compassion and love.

It need not be in any grandiose way;
Certainly not with any messianic-complex-way…

But if we can listen and hear,
Sense and feel,

Then let this lead to caring action.

Through genuine love and compassion.
Let us continue to grow and step out beyond our comfort zones in order to be faithful to our neighbors, friends, and family.

Let us not be quiet or reserved with this love,
This is a love - this a God - that's longing to be made known.

May it be so.

Benediction:

May you know and know so well -
That you are created in the image of God
That you are a beloved child of God,
And that God is with you and in you,
And known through you -

Let us go forward with resolve and courage
And with renewed commitment,

Amen.