

Zion's UCC at Taborton
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Following Jesus Is Not Rocket Science
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Did you see the news item this week in which a group of scientists reported that they have mathematically proven that it is impossible for the universe to exist? I was going to bring their work today so you could review it on your own. But, it's pages and pages of math symbols and numbers and would have been heavy to carry home, and, since my personal math career peaked with earned run and batting averages, I let it go.

Essentially they were saying that the Big Bang should have created equal amounts of matter and antimatter that would have destroyed each other leaving absolutely nothing. Yet here we are. I think that what they were trying to say is that our theories about the Big Bang are still not complete. At least I hope that's what they are saying. I would really be upset to find out that we don't exist.

It's all very complicated. Science often is. There are facts and theories that have to fit together in complex ways to form systems that explain things. Or try and explain things.

We tend to do that in all the parts of our lives. We take simple things and turn them into complex systems. Look at our education system. I worked at the State Education Department for 30 years. I know all about laws and rules and regulations, and expectations and cultural norms. I know that, for the decision-makers, what matters is not whether your child grows up to be a happy healthy individual, but whether the overall data plays well. And a complex system of laws, rules, and regulations has been set up to accomplish that. And none of it is bias free. Everybody from parents to teachers to administrators to state officials has something to gain or lose in that system. So they all try and spin things the way they want. If you have ever had to meet with school administrators because your child does not fit into the norm, you know how frustrating it can be.

We even do that in religion. We heard a reading from the Old Testament book of Leviticus today. I normally try and avoid Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy because they are almost nothing but rules and regulations regarding the practice of the Jewish faith. There are supposedly 613 (!) commandments in the Torah. I've never counted them (it's that math thing again) but that's a lot of "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not". So I guess it wasn't an unreasonable question for the Pharisee to ask Jesus about them. He was, of course, hoping that Jesus would mess up the answer and they

could then ridicule him. But, the rules were important to the Jewish people, especially the the Pharisees. They truly believed that you pleased God by following the rules.

But, as was often the case, Jesus cut through all the red tape and laid it out so that it doesn't take a rocket scientist or a legal expert to figure it out. Love God, love your neighbor and love yourself. Everything else is secondary.

You already know this, but Christian churches are no better at this than were the Jewish people of Jesus's time. We have all sorts of creeds, rules, regulations, do's and don'ts, baptism, communion, confirmation, by-laws, covenants, the human-created restrictions are almost endless.

But Jesus says there is only one commandment: love.

That's why the United Church of Christ does not have a creed like many other churches. You do not have to believe a whole list of facts to be a part of our community. All you have to do is love.

When you move on to whatever awaits you after this life no one is going to ask you to pass a written test on doctrine, nor are they going to be looking for your perfect attendance certificate. The only thing that will matter is did you love God? Did you love other human beings? And did you love yourself?

There are many ways to love God. One good and relatively easy way is to be a part of the worship of a community. Every pastor wants you to come to church. It's where we get to work our "magic" on you. But if you can't always get here on Sunday, but you participate in other activities and you understand that to be your offering to God, that's another way. Maybe you pray, but just don't let anyone know, Jesus was ok with that too. Just find a way to love.

Loving neighbor is harder than loving God, Isn't it? Our neighbors can be so exasperating. They just don't always do what we want them to do. They just can't see that we are right and get in line. God doesn't say that you must love everything your neighbor does, but you do have to learn to live in peace together.

The last part may be the hardest of all. You can't love your neighbor until you are at peace with yourself. If you are angry and fearful, and self-doubting, that's going to spill out of you into your interactions with God and your neighbors. We all need to work on finding inner peace.

This community has been through a lot this past year. There has been fear, anger and hurt. There have been harsh words and I suspect that some may have said or done things that they would like to re-think having heard our Gospel Reading today. We are in dire need of reconciliation and healing because what we have just discovered is that the stuff we fight over is all secondary to the true foundation of our faith.

We are rapidly approaching the seasons of Thanksgiving, Advent and Christmas. What better time to take the love of God, neighbor and self and apply it to our daily lives? On Thanksgiving we are reminded of what God has done in our lives. In Advent we reflect upon how each of us needs to be ready for the arrival of the Prince of Peace. And Christmas is the time when care for our neighbor takes center stage.

So I want you all to take a deep breath, and get word to those who aren't here today to do a little deep breathing as well. Stop worrying about profiles and futures, and rules and structures and all of that secondary stuff that makes us crazy. Nobody likes to go to meetings during the holidays anyway.

From now until Epiphany we are going to concentrate on what Jesus said (what a unique plan for a Christian Church!). We are going to love God, love our neighbors and maybe even learn to love ourselves.

We are going to follow the lectionary and we're going to talk some about the ebb and flow of the liturgical year. As bad as some of the stuff foisted on by theologians and religious bureaucrats, they have also given us some things that make being a follower of Jesus much easier. The liturgical seasons are one of those good things. If we pay attention to them, we'll begin to move as God intends. Truly, following Jesus is not rocket science, but it is spiritually awakening and life changing. I look forward to making this journey with you.