

**February 5, 2023**

**Sermon: Love Out Loud**

**Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16**

*<sup>13</sup> “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.*

*<sup>14</sup> “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup> People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.

Last weekend our Leadership Board went on retreat. I was tasked with the responsibility of developing a theme for this year and expounding upon how we might live into that theme as the year unfolds. Today, I am excited to share this theme with you and I invite you to think about ways you can help FCCO live into it. Now for those of you who watch our service online and may not be actively engaged in the life of the church, there is a message here for you as well. You can think of our theme as a kind of personal mission statement.

Before I tell you the theme, I want to share with you something I have heard more than once about FCCO. I have had people come up to me and say, “FCCO is a best kept secret. I had no idea that a church like this exists!” After a little more conversation, their meaning becomes clear to me. They didn’t know that there are churches that are Open and Affirming and focus so heavily on loving one’s neighbor. They didn’t know, that right down the street, there is a church that doesn’t tell people what to believe, that cares about racism, and the environment. They didn’t know there is a church that where questioning is welcomed and scripture is taken seriously but not literally. They didn’t know there is a church that considers everyone a beloved child of God. They didn’t know.

My question for you is, “why?”

On November 11, this congregation will celebrate its 140<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. We have been in the City of Orange for 140 years. Our campus is home to the longest running AA meeting in Orange County. Girl scouts, the Model A Club, the Tortoise Club, the local Barbershop Singers club, and the local Lariats square dancing club all meet on our campus. We are home to the youngest students of TLC, a public charter school that uses a unique, inclusive, educational model where non-typical learners learn side by side with typical learners. Folks from FCCO were instrumental in the launching of The Friendly Center and Orange County’s Habitat for Humanity. We have a historic connection to Chapman University, a thriving local university affiliated with our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

How is it that people don't seem to know we exist or the values that define our church?

It seems that we have a problem getting the word out, and it is a problem that requires more than creative marketing. It is a problem that requires the intentional effort of every one of us.

Here is what I think the problem is: I'm not sure we know how to tell people what we stand for or how to articulate our core values. I also think we do not realize that what we teach and preach and try to embody at FCCO is something that is urgently needed. Additionally, I think that many of us are afraid of being thought of as self-promoting and pushy.

It is our scripture reading for today that inspires what we need to do. Growing up in Sunday School, I learned the song, "This Little Light of Mine," like every other Sunday school kid. Whenever we sang the verse where it asks, "Hide it under a bushel?" We all shouted with great enthusiasm, "No! I'm gonna let it shine!"

It is that enthusiastic "No! I'm gonna let it shine," that we need to recover. We've been hiding under a bushel for far too long.

Now before I tell you the theme I want you to know something. This is not some church growth gimmick. And as much as I'd like to see this church full and our budget flush, this not an attempt to fill our pews or get more money. This is not about making a name for ourselves or being known in the community. What I am proposing is that we let our lights shine – that we believe we have something to share that our community needs – and that thing is love – not just for some, but for everyone – love that is nonviolent, expansive, and revolutionary – love that lifts us rather than tears down – love that comforts rather than threatens – love that believes in the inherent goodness of every human being – love that advocates for the most vulnerable – love. The love that Jesus taught and embodied.

The 2023 them is LOL.

While I hope we can have some fun and laughs along the way, LOL, does not, in this instance, stand for laugh out loud. It stands for love out loud. Love out loud; amplifying our witness and presence in the City of Orange.

The goal of our leadership retreat was brainstorm how we might do this as a church and individuals, and to come away with list of attainable goals for the coming year.

Here are the areas we considered:

- Social media
- Our facility
- Improving our online worship experience and increased engagement with online viewers.
- Engagement in community events
- Justice and advocacy work

- Hosting events
- Outreach
- Growing existing partnerships with community serving organizations
- Practicing hospitality and intentional care and nurture of those attend FCCO
- Training to better articulate our identity as a Progressive Christian congregation and as Progressive Christians

I want to highlight a few of these areas.

Strategic use of social media is important, not only for helping folks to find us online, but to share our message. We discussed hiring a marketing company to help us maximize our impact and develop quality and consistent messaging, and the importance of church members sharing on their own pages.

What do we need to do? Love Out Loud

Have you ever driven by our campus at night? It is practically invisible. And during the daytime there is nothing on our campus that communicates our core values. We talked about lighting, signage, banners, and waterwise landscaping.

What do we need to do? Love Out Loud

We have been streaming our worship services from the first Sunday Covid prevented us from gathering. The quality of our online service has immensely improved and I am so very grateful for the volunteers that make it happen every week. Yet, we can do better. We are now at a point where we can benefit from training on sound and production and we recognize the need for an individual to serve as an online greeter and pastor to encourage connection and engagement.

What do we need to do? Love Out Loud

Each year, Orange hosts community events that welcome the participation of congregations in the city. May Day, Treats in the Streets, the Street Fair, and the Christmas Tree Lighting. We need to be there.

What do we need to do? Love Out Loud

Our presence at Orange County Pride is just one way that we “do justice,” by standing with the LGBTQ+ community. This year, as LGBTQ+ acceptance and the study of systemic racism is being threatened by our school board, there is renewed urgency to be advocates of justice.

What do we need to do? Love Out Loud

We have a beautiful facility, with streaming capability, that would be well utilized if we hosted events that benefit our community, like speaker series or concerts.

What do we need to do? Love Out Loud

Outreach is a priority for our church, and yet too much of what we do is hands off check writing and donating of goods. Check writing and donations are important, but perhaps its time for us to physically participate in outreach endeavors and to forge relationships with the people we hope to serve. Listening is vitally important. What are the needs around us? How can we best serve and connect? One of the things we are considering is making FCCO a food distribution sight for families of TLC and Cambridge schools and anyone else who needs food.

What do we need to do? Love Out Loud

We don't have to reinvent the wheel when it comes to serving our neighbors. We can work to improve our relationships with organizations already doing great work in the community. The more involved we are, the more aware and empathetic we become, of the needs and stories of those around us.

What do we need to do? Love Out Loud

Hospitality is the work of making each person that we greet and serve as a church feel welcome and beloved. It covers everything from the language we use in worship, to how we greet newcomers. The work of hospitality extends to how we care for one another and to make sure that there are no cracks through which one can fall.

What do we need to do? Love Out Loud

Finally, we need to learn to articulate what it is we do value as a progressive Christian congregation and as Progressive Christians. We need to learn to speak out about what it is we do believe and why. What does it mean to be a progressive Christian?

It means being open and affirming. It means dismantling racism. It means caring for our environment. It means seeking justice and equality for all people. It means respecting other faith traditions. It means living in a way that transforms us to become more Christlike. It means compassion for immigrants and others who are maligned and demonized. It means humility and being curious rather than judgmental. It means recognizing every human being as a beloved child of God. It means a commitment to life-long learning. It means actively seeking and working for the kingdom of God on earth, right here and right now. It means being loving over being right. It means following Jesus, to the cross if we must, in service to our neighbor. It means shining God's light into the dark and broken places of our collective lives and working for healing and wholeness.

If you want chapter and verse, I'll give it to you.

Are we going to hide it under a bushel? No!

What are we going to do? Love Out Loud

It's not just the work of the Leadership Board...it is the holy calling of all who profess to following Jesus.

May this be the year we find our voice. Amen.