

**Dear Friends,**

Early Christians didn't call themselves Christians, but followers of the Way. For them, following Jesus was a practice, not a doctrine or belief, and they certainly didn't see themselves as individuals who went to 'church' but as part of a community that changed every part, every aspect of their life. Without sounding like a prophet, at best, or a cult leader, at worst, I am not sure how we proclaim that and live that out in our day and age. The world is vastly different than those in Jesus' time in many ways, not just in technology. Rather than being a small group of people trying to escape the Empire's notice, Christianity is the religion of Empire beginning with Constantine and posing with Trump (heretical as it may be).

I think and hope that one way, maybe our best bet, is to rediscover that relationship many of us glimpsed as a child in which God is love and wants us to be happy. God is near to us and present and not a theological riddle to solve, a set of laws to try to conform to, or a way to escape eternal torment.

I came across a story of our UCC treasure, Rev. Dr. Susan Thistlewaite, was in a conversation with an atheist who tried to skewer her by asking how she could believe in a God that is invisible and not here on this world. Her two-word reply left him speechless (as the story goes), "We've met!"

Over fifty-percent of Americans have claimed to have a spiritual experience at some point in their lives. God has come to us through the child of Bethlehem, through the Holy Spirit, through animals, through the wilderness, and through our planet.

Though I don't always succeed (what is the batting average for a pastor and worship and the church) and to mix metaphors, sometimes I fall off or get knocked off my horse, my calling is to help us as a community follow and experience the peace and love of God. Our community's calling is to share that peace and love, through justice and compassion, in our world.

I am hopeful that we don't get into debates with atheists and agnostics, but into conversations with people of all faiths and those without, and we can humbly and assuredly say, "We've met" when challenged on our practice, theology, or political stance that precludes us, in their paradigm, from encountering the God of Love.

Peace