

Talk delivered at Kiwanis Club, Clergy Appreciation Day – La Crosse, WI 10/25/22
(forgive the written length; it only took 15 minutes for me to present!)

Friends, I have come to you today to talk about love.

I know – I'll bet that you expected me to come here today – the only rabbi in an 80-mile radius – to alert you to the rapidly rising hate speech in our society today, the virulent racism and antisemitism that is showing up, even here in our quiet little valley. Like these swastikas spray-painted on campaign billboards all over Holmen a couple of months ago:



NO – I come to you today to talk about LOVE

Or MAYBE you want me to address these hateful chalk marks scrawled last week on the sidewalks of our beautiful and beloved UW-La Crosse campus



NO – I come to you today to talk about LOVE

You probably expected me to come to you today, to talk about this painful display of hate that showed up yesterday on the 405 freeway in LA:



No, my friends, - I did **NOT** come to talk to you about these things. You already **know** all about these things.

These things all showed up on your computers, your ipads, your PHONES, as soon as they happened.

So - you don't need me to remind you about all these things.

I am here today to talk about love. The love that we share here in the Coulee Region, southwestern Wisconsin and southeastern Minnesota.

My friends, after the swastika billboard incident, I wrote a letter to the editor of the La Crosse Tribune. I didn't just condemn the swastika painters. I said it was not a problem just for Jewish people. I said it was a problem for ALL of us. It was an attack on Christian values, on Muslim values, on American values. On human values. Hate against some of us is hate against all of us, and it cannot be tolerated.

And I wrote that the ONLY way to fight hate is with LOVE.

I received 22, yes 22 e-mails – supporting my call for a campaign of love in our region. I also got half a dozen voice mails from our friends, expressing the same feelings of love and support.

The Torah tells us -vehavta lera'acha kamo'cha -

וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ

Love your fellow as yourself.



The most famous verse in Leviticus may be the command, “Love your neighbor as yourself” ([Lev. 19:18](#)). Matthew 22: 35-40)

This imperative is so sweeping that both Jesus and the rabbis regarded it as one of the two “great” commandments, the other being “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” ([Mark 12:29-31](#); cf. [Deut. 6:4](#)).

In quoting [Leviticus 19:18](#), the Apostle Paul wrote that “love is the fulfilling of the law” ([Rom. 13:10](#)), love your neighbor as you love yourself .

Wait, what if your neighbor doesn't mow his lawn regularly?

Wait, what if she doesn't shovel her walk 24 hours after a big snowstorm?

Wait, what if they tailgate you on Losey Boulevard, or prevent you from merging into traffic?

Wait, what if they don't slow down and stop for you, when you are laden down with groceries, and you are crossing the street?

Are you still supposed to love them?

When I lived in bigger cities, when they saw a pedestrian stepping off the curb, often motorists would speed up, and treat it like a changing yellow traffic light. They would often step on the gas, and swerve around the unfortunate pedestrian or bicyclist. “Hey, this is MY street you’re crossing here!” Doesn’t sound so passive aggressive to me!

Or what if the neighbor you love doesn’t stop for students crossing at the flashing crossing signs around the UW-L campus?

What about **those** neighbors?

Yes, we still are commanded to love them.

Friends, we are in a blessed time and a holy place. Jews all over the world have just completed the High Holy Days, a whole month of celebrations, including Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, the Ten Days of Awe, Yom Kippur- the day of fasting and atonement or **at-one-ment** and Sukkot, the Festival of Booths. A very blessed time indeed!

My friends, I have just completed three years in this calling, I was asked to shepherd a 164-year-old little Jewish congregation through some very challenging times.

Sadly, we have lost family members of our congregants to COVID. As their rabbi, I wasn’t even permitted to visit them in hospice.

And, just like you, my dear fellow clergy, I was not allowed to hold their hands while they died.



The **La Crosse Interfaith Leaders Coalition** was there for me throughout the pandemic.

This organization – the ILC – was created by clergy like us, to help us help our parishioners.

Many of us clergy members talked with each other each month on Zoom.

We commiserated and supported each other.

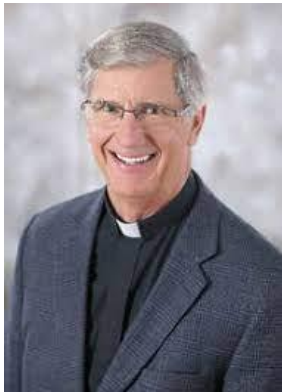
We learned how to go online and master zoom and Facebook Live technology for our congregations.

We set up tents and we worshipped outdoors.

AND each month, we just listened to each other when we needed an understanding ear, during a very challenging time for us and for our flocks.



I am so grateful for the path begun by my predecessor **Rabbi Simcha Prombaum** in his 37+ years of service to this warm and loving community. He showed me the way and the crucial importance to our community of interfaith work and worship. I have big shoes to fill.



I am so grateful for Pastor Mark Solyst, former senior pastor of English Lutheran Church, for starting the Interfaith Leaders Coalition years ago.



I am also grateful for his successor and my fellow co-leader of the ILC – Senior Pastor Mark Kvale of English Lutheran Church

(By the way, I prefer to work with pastors named Mark.)

We are so grateful for the many people who attended the monthly Community Conversations at English Lutheran and online over the past few years. People of all faith communities maintained a sense of community during very tough times. We learned so much from our presenters on so many important issues.

I encourage all of you to become involved in the Interfaith Leaders Coalition, for all the beautiful love and acts of grace which you can bring to our community.

I encourage you to attend the ILC meetings – the next one is on November 16, at 1:15 PM, after Community Conversations. It will be both in person and on Zoom.

My short tenure in this blessed valley has been amazing. I suspect that never has a rabbi been known to visit 40 churches a year!

Last spring, I was asked to lead Passover seder services at two churches and at Viterbo University. They make great matzo ball soup, by the way. Amazing!

And you have all visited us. Over 50 visits from church members and Sunday school students from Viroqua to La Crosse to Onalaska, and college courses from Viterbo and UW-La Crosse.

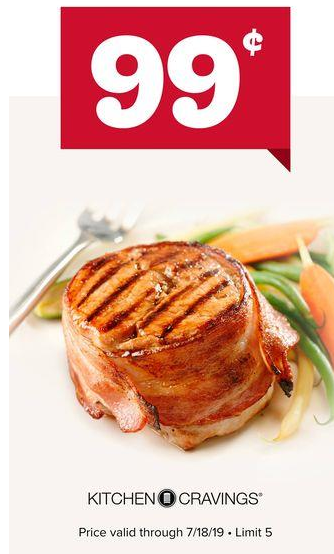
I love the questions these students always prepare in advance for me to answer.

Recently, 50 students from a local middle school came to visit. One student asked, “Rabbi Brian, do the Jews believe in Hell?” I asked him, “Well, what does Hell mean to you?” And this bright 15 year old young man said, “Well, you die, and then you burn and suffer for the rest of eternity”. I answered him, “Who needs to wait till you die to understand eternal suffering? **Aren’t you in middle school?**”

Last month, another 50 students from a local confirmation class posed some very challenging theological questions.

“Rabbi, what are the kosher food rules all about?” I explained that many Jews do not eat pork or ham or bacon. It is prohibited in the Torah. Many still follow the law, even if they are not religious. Lots of the kids were surprised.

Yes, I told them, I really suffer when I go into the local Kwik Trip convenience store, to see that the daily special is “pork loin wrapped in bacon” for only \$.99.



Friends, for me, that is **two sins in one package!** “Lord, lead me not into temptation!”

I want to finish up by talking about some of the incredible ways in which our faith communities demonstrate every day how we **love our neighbors** in this beautiful valley:

To name just a few:

We are working hard to solve homelessness.

- As the gorgeous 70-degree fall weather quickly becomes 32 and winter, hundreds of residents of the tent city along the Mississippi are no longer able to stay outdoors. So many of you is this room – and your congregants - are working hard to find both temporary solutions (warming shelters, soup kitchens, short-term housing) and permanent ones (affordable housing, on-site volunteers to direct people to community resources). I am blessed to be one of many working on the Mayor’s advisory council on homelessness. We hope to have places for all our homeless neighbors to stay warm this winter.

Feeding the Hungry

- **The Hunger Walk** was very successful again this year, **with thousands of dollars raised to combat hunger.**
- **Mobile Meals** is a way for your members to deliver hot meals to elderly people and shut-ins. Some of your churches have volunteered for certain weeks to make these deliveries.
- **Mobile Meals** is a real “mitzvah” - who here knows what a mitzvah is? A mitzvah is a **good deed** – a deed for which we should expect no reward. The act of giving charity should be the reward in itself. Friends, Mobile Meals is a mitzvah with **an immediate reward.** When you come to the door of these folks with a hot meal, especially in the dead of winter, the love you receive is both total and immediate. Where else do you get such an amazing return on your invested time? Please encourage your members to sign up!

La Crosse Jail Ministry - Any clergy here visiting inmates in jail? Any of you who SHOULD be in jail? My friends, of all the things I do each week, these have been the most rewarding hours of each week in my ministry here in La Crosse. Chaplain Ann Wales is an amazing example to others in serving those who need us.



Welcoming the Stranger

The Bible says:

“Be sure to welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests, without even knowing it.” – Hebrews 13:2

“Don’t mistreat any foreigners who live in your land. Instead, treat them as well as you treat citizens and love them as much as you love yourself. Remember, you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” – Leviticus 19:33-34

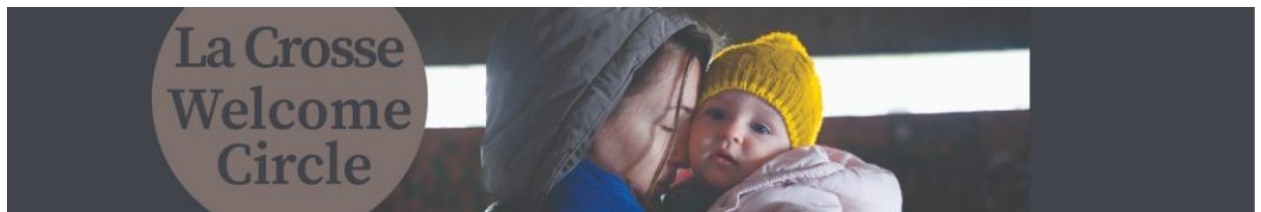
Friends, do you all remember when our faith communities stepped up to help the 15,000 Afghan refugees crammed into nearby Fort McCoy not too long ago?

Where are those Afghan refugees today?

Well, we found them coats and boots and gloves and housing and jobs and English language lessons.

Friends, **all those people** – all those Afghans fleeing war - have started new lives all over the U.S., with our help and our blessing.

Let me tell you about the **La Crosse Welcome Circle**



As the assault on Ukraine continues to intensify, thousands are killed and wounded.

Thousands more of its citizens are being displaced. Many of them will never be able to return to their homes, which have been destroyed by the Russian armed forces.

To help those affected find new homes here in the Coulee Region, seven members of our community formed the La Crosse Welcome Circle (LWC) to assist Ukrainians who wish to temporarily resettle here in our Coulee Region.

We are excited to tell you that the first Ukrainian newcomers will be here in November!

Lastly I want to tell you about the **interfaith Israel trip** we are planning:



Friends, 24 years ago, our La Crosse community went on a trip to the Holy Land, Muslims, Christians and Jews together exploring the foundation place of our faiths.

Next May, join us as we renew our ties with our ancestral home. Make friendships that will last a lifetime. Join us as we eat and pray with Druze families, Bedouin families, Palestinian families and Israeli families. We hope to bring back great pictures and wonderful stories to share.

I ask you to tell your parishioners about this great trip. I hope they can join us.

I would like to end with a prayer.

The late Jewish cantor and songwriter Debbie Friedman said it so well.

We are all on a journey, every year, every day, every hour

Tefilat Haderech – Debbie Friedman z”l

words and music by Debbie Friedman, debbiefriedman.com

Tefillat Haderech, also known as the "wayfarer's prayer," originally founded in *Talmud Brachot* and later appearing in prayerbooks offers a blessing to those who are about to embark upon a journey. Debbie Friedman's song and sentiment that can be shared on any occasion that involves a journey.

May we be blessed as we go on our way
May we be guided in peace
May we be blessed with health and joy
May this our blessing, amen.
Amen, Amen, may this be our blessing, amen.
Amen, Amen, may this be our blessing, amen.

May we be sheltered by the wings of peace
May we be kept in safety and in love
May grace and compassion find their
way to every soul
May this be our blessing, amen.
Amen, Amen, may this be our blessing, amen.
Amen, Amen, may this be our blessing, amen.

**Thank you to the Kiwanis Club for honoring us today.
Thank you all for the love you bring to our valley.**

May God bless us all.