

In the World for Love of the World

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, May 24, 2020)

My friends, the God of Love within me, greets the God of Love within you.

This Sunday marks the final week of the seven weeks of the Easter Season. During these seven weeks our theme has been, 'Heart of the Matter,' and we have reflected on various inner resources we could use to help us face these days of physical distancing. Over the weeks, we have listened to and become part of the post-resurrection stories of Jesus, stories that depict the disciples' grief and sadness over the loss of their teacher. They show Jesus still teaching the disciples and his great love for them, and they tell of how the disciples stayed connected with Jesus and heard his words of assurance and encouragement.

One might think that after the three years that the disciples had spent with Jesus during his public ministry and the 40 days after the resurrection, they would have acquired an understanding of Jesus' teachings. But it seems that they didn't. The last post-resurrection story suggests that the disciples are still somewhat confused and doubtful.

And so even in his very last moments with them before his ascension, Jesus is still their teacher: *Let's go over this one more time...* He "opens their minds to understanding the scriptures." – because it seemed as if their minds were closed and they were not getting the message.

But whether the disciples are ready or not, Jesus must pass the teacher mantle to them. It is as if he was saying, "But I say to you, take up my mantle, for you, too, have a role to play in God's story of redemption. You shall proclaim the good news with your words, and especially with your lives. You, all of you, I now commission and bless you and send you into the world for the love of the world!" Jesus promises that they will receive the power of the Spirit before going into the world. This reception of the Spirit is what we honor on Pentecost Sunday, the occasion of the birth of the church.

The 40-day post-resurrection stories provided the courage, hope, empowerment, and insight the newly forming Christian communities needed to enable them to proclaim the good news. This Sunday is often celebrated as "Ascension Sunday," marking the risen Jesus' departure after 40 days of dwelling with the community of disciples. In the early church, the Ascension and Pentecost celebrations would have signaled the readiness of the followers of the Way to venture out into the world. As the body of Christ, they would go "into the world for the love of the world."

From each post-resurrection story, we have been able to gain some wisdom about how we might survive and thrive in this pandemic age. Today's story is equally relevant. It is about the importance of the body of Christ, the church, moving into the world for the love of the world, proclaiming the good news.

It is good to reflect on what it means to be "church," the body of Christ, in the world for the love of the world when we cannot be in the world as we were before. We cannot gather in our worship places, the concrete presence of the church in the world. These were the spaces and places from which we reached out, served the world, connected with various organizations to work for justice and peace, and gathered with friends, neighbors, and strangers in worship.

Now, we must stay at home, maintain physical distancing, and wait for this challenging time to pass before we can go back "into the world." Does physical distancing mean that we cannot be the body of Christ in the world for the love of the world?

I discovered an insightful answer to this question in an article entitled 'Ascension,' on the 'salt' webpage. 'salt' is an Emmy award winning non-profit organization focusing on expressing spirituality through all the arts.

"In the first place, 'the world' includes our personal lives and homes and families and friends, both the people we live with and the people with whom we're in touch with from a distance. So, we can be the church by living together with love and forgiveness, and by reaching out from a distance to those who need encouragement and companionship.

Second, staying at home and self-distancing, properly maintained, are themselves practices with life-and-death effects, so we should understand these measures as profoundly significant forms of social engagement that keep the world safe for the love of the world. The term social distancing is contradictory. What we need is increased '*physical* distancing' and, at the same time, increased '*social* connectedness.'" In this regard, there are all kinds of ways to be the body of Christ, the church, as we stay connected with the wider world and support our neighbors. Now more than ever, the words: "Into the world, for the love of the world!" challenge our faith and our love.

As a congregation physically distancing, we must continue to ask ourselves, 'How can we make a difference? What are we willing to commit to so we can inspire love, joy, and hope? How can we be in the world for the love of the world?

There is a human tendency to seek out direction and guidance to help us deal with the reality of living. We all need resources to face the

struggles and suffering of life and to discern where we are going. We need to figure out how to be more caring, kind, and understanding and how to address present challenges. We want to be at peace with ourselves and others, so that we can have a positive impact on our lives, especially during these troublesome days.

According to Brian McLaren in his book *The Great Spiritual Migration*, we can accomplish this as individuals and as a faith community when we let our lives migrate toward a life centered on love. In so doing, love becomes the energy that informs our actions, behaviors, and thoughts and enables us to support each other emotionally, physically, spiritually and mentally. McLaren writes, "Love was not only the heart of Jesus' teaching; it was also the heartbeat of his daily life."

In his book, *The Third Jesus*, spiritual director Deepak Chopra writes, "If people remember nothing else about Jesus, they carry around his saying to love God and their neighbor as themselves. Jesus passionately embodied that high ideal. He lived it, taught it, and gave his life for it." Chopra sees Jesus as someone who lived out of a different consciousness, what he calls God-consciousness that allowed him to "treat love as something radical, as a life-changing event."

Just as Jesus opened the minds of the disciples so that they could understand his teachings, this pandemic has opened our God-consciousness. It has shown us that what is external is not as important as what is internal. We have had our minds open to Jesus' teachings that the content, rather than the container, is more important. The wine, not the wineskin, is what is essential. What is in the cup, not the cup, is what is necessary.

As the body of Christ, what matters most is not so much the container, the beliefs, rules, regulations, denominations, and doctrine, but the content. What is essential is what resides at the heart of our faith, and the heartbeat of our faith and daily life must be love

McLaren writes, a church that makes "love its highest aim must be rooted and grounded in love so that every action of welcome, every interaction and conversation, every prayer, song, poem, and work of visual and dramatic art, every rite of passage, ritual and spiritual resource, enable people to migrate toward a richer love that is expansive and deep and wide and large and is extended to all without restraint."

Love, as described by McLaren and lived out in the life of Jesus, is the way that the body of Christ continues to be alive and present in the world whether we gather physically, or we connect from a distance. Love

enables us to carry on Jesus' work of healing, justice, and proclaiming the dawn of a new way of living in the world.

In the book *Take me to the Truth*, we read, "In each and every encounter we have with another, we are given the opportunity to either imprison or liberate ourselves. Whatever we give out, we keep. Love itself can only ever increase through sharing. Every loving thought or every chance we take to think, see, feel, or act in loving ways such as forgiving, listening, being grateful, accepting, and giving, will manifest as love both in us and those with whom we live and connect from a distance. The more we give, the more we receive, and love keeps extending infinitely."

People worldwide have shown that love is the content of their hearts, and has become the heartbeat of their daily lives. Unconditional love shared from gracious hearts is helping us to become more human, more caring and kinder in our treatment of ourselves, others, our neighbors, and all of creation. We now know more clearly than ever before that love is something radical and life changing. The more we give the more we receive. As we give and receive love, we transform into more loving versions of ourselves as we help each other to face the challenges of each day. As each heart transforms, so too does the heart of the world.

This morning I invite all of us to renew our commitment to love. It is not just to think about love, but to be love's presence in every moment of our lives, every breath, every interaction, and every prayer we send out.

I close with an adapted version of a blessing by John O'Donohue:

May we have the courage to take one more step in love,
Into the unknown that surrounds us;
Trust that a richer life occurs within us each day,
Enabling us to open the heart to a deeper knowing
Of all that is being born anew in us.

May this be so for us all. Amen.