

Repeating the Sounding Joy of Love

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, December 8, 2019)

This week we continue our “Joy” series focusing on the second verse of Joy to the World. During this Advent of love, how important it is for us to remember that “repeating the sounding joy” of love is how the vibrations of love spread throughout the world. And so, we raise our praise today to repeat what all creation is saying, God is love, we are loved, and we are called to love.

In the final pages of Steve Galloway’s haunting novel, *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, we read an account of the fall of that Bosnian city. Approximately ten thousand people lost their lives during the 1992-96 siege, and thousands suffered from wounds of every imaginable type. A beautiful city was senselessly wiped out by the 329 shells that hit it each day. We hear the thoughts of one of the characters as he listened to the “conversation of violence” around him. Dragan, “wonders what they (the snipers) think about, up there in the safety of their hills. Do they wish for this war to be over? Are they happy when they hit something, or is it enough to frighten people? Do they feel remorse when they go home and look at their children, or are they pleased, thinking they have done a great service for future generations? Dragan never understood, even before the war began, why they thought people like him were such a threat. He still doesn’t understand what killing him would accomplish, what effect it would have on anyone but him.”

This tragic story is only one of many that have occurred throughout the centuries in countries around the world. One can imagine the hundreds of thousands of innocent people sitting in prisons, fleeing their countries, witnessing the senseless deaths of their loved ones, and seeing their homes, towns, and cities devastated, wondering what has been accomplished by destroying their lives

In this life, it often feels as if the sounds of love and joy are not repeating, that indeed they are silent, or perhaps muted amidst the cries of

fear, grief, pain, hopelessness, and loss. Yet the sounds of love and joy do exist and are real, and they do have the power to change the sometimes barren and desolate landscapes of life.

The anchor image that we are holding up throughout the series is the green of nature celebrated in Psalm 98. The green of wreaths, trees, sprigs of holly and mistletoe, cedars, and garland are significant right now when, for us, winter turns the landscape into frozen, bleak and colorless scenes. Landscapes not unlike the barrenness of a city under siege or the emptiness of one's heart.

Spiritually, green is seen as the color of growth, the color of spring, renewal, and rebirth. That which is green renews and restores depleted energy providing a calmness that pulls us away from the stresses of life and restores us to a sense of wellbeing. The seasons of spring and summer feel more relaxed because there is so much green.

Spiritually, green is an emotionally positive color providing stability and endurance and giving us persistence and the strength to cope with adversity. It represents balance and harmony and speaks of growth amid death, of resurrection. Most importantly, green is the symbol of unconditional love and represents the heart chakra.

Each week we enhance the sanctuary as we add additional green symbols in order to inspire calm during the stresses of the season and to assure us that there is life within devastation, loss, and sadness. We add green to visualize the persistence and strength we must have to cope with adversity and to remind us of a new life that is to be born that will bring radical love to the barren landscapes of life and of people's hearts.

Just as green transforms desolate, frozen landscapes in the spring and summer encouraging new life, balance, and wellbeing, so too is love able to transform the scenes of our human struggles and challenges with hope, healing, and renewal.

The reading from Isaiah is a compelling vision of how love can dramatically change the landscape of life—the wolf and the lamb living

together, and people led in the way of love by an innocent child. Let us hear the words from the prophet Isaiah:

“A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;

a branch will sprout from his roots.

The Lord’s spirit will rest upon him,

a spirit of wisdom and understanding,

a spirit of planning and strength,

a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.

He will delight in fearing the Lord.

He won’t judge by appearances,

nor decide by hearsay.

He will judge the needy with righteousness,

and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land.

He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth;

by the breath of his lips, he will kill the wicked.

Righteousness will be the belt around his hips,

and faithfulness the belt around his waist.

The wolf will live with the lamb,

and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;

the calf and the young lion will feed together,

and a little child will lead them.

The cow and the bear will graze.

Their young will lie down together,
 and a lion will eat straw like an ox.
 A nursing child will play over the snake's hole;
 toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den.
They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain.
The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the Lord,
 just as the water covers the sea.
On that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the peoples. The
 nations will seek him out, and his dwelling will be glorious."

The Hebrew prophets understood how love could transform life and the power of the love of one person to make a difference. It is love that inspires our capacity to break down barriers and walk the path of peace. People tend to seek out direction and guidance to help us deal with the reality of living. To help us know how to face the struggles and suffering of life and to figure out how to be more caring, kind and understanding, how to address environmental and global problems, and how to be at peace with ourselves and others.

According to Brian McLaren in *The Great Spiritual Migration*, we can accomplish this when we let our lives migrate toward a life centered on love, just as Jesus' life focused on love. McLaren writes, "Love was not only the heart of Jesus' teaching; it was also the heartbeat of his daily life." For Jesus, what was important was how people could become more loving in their relationships to God, to self, to others, to their neighbor, and creation.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus claims to be the one referred to in Isaiah's vision, and he set out to fulfill that vision. As McLaren suggests, "Of the many radical things said and done by Jesus, his unflinching emphasis on love was most radical of all. Love was the greatest

commandment, he said. It was his new commandment, his prime directive – love for God, self, for neighbor, for stranger, for alien, for outsider, for outcast, and even for enemy, as he himself modeled.”

Jesus’ parables and aphorisms encouraged a shift in consciousness away from narrow, limiting beliefs of exclusion, prejudice, and virtue. He wanted people to develop a love-consciousness knowing that as more people shift their consciousness toward love, the greater the possibility that barriers could be brought down, and that the world could be transformed.

In every parable, teaching, conversation, and interaction with others, Jesus demonstrated a loving awareness. Where there was hatred between religious groups, he invited discussion and encouraged reconciliation. When children were shunned, Jesus welcomed them. When people were stigmatized, cast out, and denied, he invited them to the table and treated them with dignity and respect. Jesus listened to the concerns of women, and when people confronted him with accusations, he responded with calm and wisdom. In love and for love, Jesus gave of himself wholly and without condition.

Jesus’ ministry was effective and life-changing because, through love, people learned to love themselves when others despised them, to love others without prejudice, to love God with all one’s heart, and to love creation and cherish it. He taught people how to be authentic, loving human beings.

Like Jesus, Paul encouraged his followers to be authentic, loving human beings, and in his letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, Paul writes about God’s love. To the church in Ephesus, he says, “I pray that from God’s glorious, unlimited resources that God will empower you with inner strength through the spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong. And you will have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep God’s love is. In Colossians 3:14, “Above all, clothe yourself with love.”

We all have the potential to green the barren landscapes of life when we acquire a loving awareness that makes room in our hearts for love and when love becomes the heartbeat of our daily lives. A love-consciousness

arises when we surrender the deep-seated notion that we are separate and different from each other. We, at our core, are all the same, for we have been created in Love by infinite Love itself. From the heart of love, we care, support, respect, and love each other without condition.

In his book *Born for Love*, Leo Buscaglia writes, "The majority of us lead quiet, unheralded lives as we pass through this world. There will most likely be no ticker-tape parades for us, no monuments created in our honor. But that does not lessen our possible impact upon the world, for there are scores of people waiting for someone just like us to come along: people who will appreciate our compassion, our encouragement, who will need our unique talents. Someone who will live a happier life merely because we took the time to share what we had to give. Too often, we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of loving, all of which have the potential to turn a life around."

The smallest gesture can have the most potent impact because, in a loving encounter, a person feels that he or she is worth our time and attention. A person can feel valued and loved through a quiet gesture on our part simply by being fully present, making eye contact, and being sincerely interested.

Poet Maya Angelou once said, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." In our quiet unheralded lives as we pass through this world, living with a loving awareness 'greens' not only our inner landscapes but the landscapes of others. Love-conscious people do not wait around wondering how they can change the world; they change the world. Within each of us is the ability to make a person feel valued, accepted, heard, and loved because, as theologian Karl Rahner so wisely discerned, every person is an existence of the absolute, radical, free, self-communication of God. In other words, each one of us is a manifestation of divine love; the Spirit of love is incarnate not only in us, but as us.

McLaren encourages us in the way of love when he writes, "Love all of God's creation, both the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every

leaf, every ray of God's light. Love animals, love plants, love each thing. If you love each thing, you will perceive the mystery of God in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin tirelessly to perceive more and more of it every day." So, my friends let us perceive love more and more every day because the more we can repeat the sounding joy of love, and the more loving joy grows and the greener the world becomes inspiring new life to rise over and over again. Amen.