

Love, nearer to us than life itself

Numbers 21:4b-9; Psalm 98:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:18-24; John 3:13-17

Holy Cross Day

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Do you know how difficult it is to drive your truck in reverse when you have a trailer hitched to it? Quick show of hands, who has done this before? Talk to me after the service. I'll need your help. As Justin and I begin our journey of keeping what we need for our move, packing, and planning our move out day to Austin, I am reminded of the first day that I arrived to Houston to start my internship at Christ the King Church. Parson Larson met me and my two cats at Naomi Nelson's house, with hardly any furniture save my bed, and a couple of chairs. As I attempted to back into Naomi's driveway, with no discernable success, I wondered: what am I doing here? What had I gotten myself into. I now have language for what I felt spiritually. I was in, what St. John of the Cross calls, "a dark night of the soul." I had trouble praying, studying scripture, and whenever I thought of my own gifts, I saw nothing but shortcomings. My mother can tell you, I struggle with certainty, with entrusting all that I am and all that I have to God. Certainty was and is an enemy to me. But not love (I'll tell you more about what I mean by this later on). Love is more certain to me than the air that we breathe.

Everyone has something about love: Augustine, Rumi, Shakespeare, Richard Rohr, Whitney Houston, anyone on this earth who literally takes a breath. I want to be clear about love. I'm not talk about the sentimental kind of love; one that is all neatly packaged, picked out of an endless offering of profiles on Hinge or Tinder. Nor I am talking about romantic or erotic love which the author of Song of Songs says, *is as strong as death, its passion as fierce as the grave* (Song 8:6). I'm talking about your collective love. From the many lunches on Naomi's porch as we all weathered the pandemic, to the many hours spent in dinners, and at Croissant-Brioche, to the many informal discussions before and after bible study, you truly demonstrated how God's love has been poured out into your hearts. Of all the teachings Jesus and his disciples shared with the world, it has been Jesus' new command that I have seen in action here: *love one another, just as I have loved you, so you too must love one another* (Jn 13:34). This is the message you share with the world around you (using words when necessary); family and friends, co-workers, neighbors, saints who have died and now share with us in the feast of love, the body and blood of Christ. God's love changes lives; changes us by healing within us the many wounds we collectively feel at this moment in time.

Jesus died and was raised so that God's love may be experienced by every believer, then and now. Of the many confusing answers he gave to Nicodemus one evening, (about matters pertaining to being born from above by water and the Spirit), love might have been the least clear to him. Nicodemus came to him at night because he saw God's presence in the signs he had done both at Cana and in the Temple. He looked to Jesus for the fuller explanation as to how God worked in and through his wonders and miracles. He's like many of our modern-day seekers, searching for a divine spark, a connection with something larger than himself, to give meaning and purpose to his life. But many of us know how elusive this may be. Even our very doctrines and traditions, for as permanent as they may appear, have changed according the shifting sands that is life. Consider the atonement. We as Lutherans no longer speak about Jesus' death as the consequence of the debt due to our sins. Or even the filioque (that phrase we used to say in the Nicene Creed about the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father....and the Son).

Jesus directs Nicodemus to the Spirit so that he could fix his mind on God's perspective. Our God is the Lord of Life. The God who creates and fashions every living thing in this world so that together, all may praise and give thanks. God does, "*all of this*," as Luther says in his explanation to the first article of the creed, "*out of pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy*." Or other words, love. Thanks to the helpful guidance of our retired, clergy, it is worth saying that in John's Gospel, there are two words for love (rather, loving). First, is *phileo*, which is not present in our passage today. Word typically (but not always) refers to the love between friends, siblings, etc, and not God's love towards us. Jesus is said to have loved (*phileo*) Lazarus, and the beloved disciple. There is also the love of siblings, Philadelphia (which I talked about two weeks ago And of course, there is *agape* love, the "highest" form of love; the love of God towards humanity, that forms the basis of love. This is the God so loved the world kind of love. This love changes the world! It gives eternal life. How? How do we experience eternal life now, in the present moment? You know the answer to it. What does Jesus say in the middle of his farewell discourse, after washing the disciples' feet, and Judas rushing out to set the motion in plan for his crucifixion?: "No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends. [further] I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."

I can certainly call many of you here, my friends, because you have been there for me as I have been there for you. Last year, my mental health took a pretty nasty turn for several months. I suffered from panic attacks for numerous reasons. I wasn't taking care of myself. I didn't take sabbath as I should have. It got pretty bad to the point that during one Saturday service, I went to the sacristy during the prayers, to get some air. After that service, I did not feel comfortable driving home. That's when members of this congregation helped me manage my panic, drive me home, and on the way purchase a smoothie to get some energy in me after this episode. From that point on, I started back on better medication, started seeing a therapist, taking my necessary sabbath rest and the like. What I saw in that moment was love. Incarnate love taking care of me, just as anyone of us would have done to someone we saw who was in need. That's the kind of love we need now. How many of us have been wounded by stories of political violence as of late? Or have losses we have yet to confront? Love changes us not by erasing the scars we carry. Love changes us by turning us towards God, and to each other. The bread and cup we share shows us the way to heal our collective souls. We are bread and wine to each other, to heal our souls. Do you know that people here need to hear how God has touched you? Do you know that you are Christ to people who are politically at odds with you? This is the great gift and challenge of our day: Just as Jesus continues to love us, so we too are to love others until Christ comes again! Then love shall no longer be in part but be as ever-present as the air we breathe.

I take my leave of you now with Paul's words, my friends, my abridged form of 1 Corinthians 13: *Love never ends! Everything else will! Prophecies, knowledge, education, wealth, power, evil, sin, life, death, and even faith itself.* Jesus is with you: Love abides. **Amen.**