

Easter 4
Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church
4/21/2024
Luann Yutzy

I John 3:16-24

Heart Check

We are a little past Easter and the shadow of the cross into the morning light of the resurrection still follows us everywhere. We know that we have passed from death into life because we love one another verse 14 says a few verses before what was read today. The Paschal Mystery¹ of life, the process of dying and rising, death and new life is something we see all around us.

Nature is a place we often observe this death and new life. When we do the controlled burns in the fields or parks at times, we are intentionally setting on fire certain areas so that a healthier ecosystem or crops can survive and in some cases improve habitat for wildlife and plants.

We are very much in tune with the changes in our seasons here. Not everywhere are seasons so dramatic as we have. The leaves just emerging on the trees will in a few months shrivel and fall off and blow away. We may try to delay the fall frosts killing our summer plants but it will happen at some point.

Our Cottonwood tree in our yard is supposedly coming down this week. The electric company is taking three days to do it. I feel the dying part of the process every day when I look at her, the tree who has been around for hundreds of years. A town grew around her. Transportation changed around her. She probably once stood with the other Cottonwoods without houses, by the little run, leaves glistening in the wind and the sun. I wonder if she would have seen the original people on the plains here who lived with the land.

If we take time to pause and look around us we see death and new life. People well seasoned in life talking with people just graduating from high school, babies at funerals, plants growing from the watermelon we threw out last summer. We see this cycle and it touches on something eternal. It reminds us of the presence of God always with us, in the changes, the Paschal mystery of life.

You've heard the quote sometimes attributed to St. Francis of, "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words?" That goes along with our passage today about human love in community and having a faith that has some legs on it.

¹<https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/family/catholic-teens/catholic-teachings-for-teens/the-paschal-mystery-in-every-day-life/>

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Eugene Peterson in *The Message* says it this way:

Vs. 17 “If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God’s love? It disappears. And you made it disappear.”

That is a pretty direct way to say it, isn’t it? If you are like me, there are so many situations we know of that could use love that it can be paralyzing. I feel somewhat numb at times.

This scripture is meant to encourage us and give us confidence that being rooted in God means we have access to the agape kind of love that supercedes our numbness, our self-doubt and gives us boldness.

In this section of John 1, we are reminded that our faith results in acts of love.

I wonder what would have to happen for this church here at Alexanderwohl to be known as the church that had faith with legs! There probably is a great little logo you could make and have t-shirts of the church building with little legs or maybe many legs under it.

How do we get known for that?

We might say it isn’t in our DNA to be bold and loud in our actions of love. We do things behind the scenes. We prefer to be the silent in the land. “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary?”

Get some legs on our faith and see where the spirit takes us. What are you seeing in your neighborhood, your job, your family? Your marriage? Your relationships?

Where is the need?

In the context of the early Anabaptists, there was persecution because of their unorthodox belief about baptism. They were known for their radical love of their enemies, in some cases the ones who were pursuing them.

As an Anabaptist, or rebaptizer, I am committed to following Christ in daily life and I am committed to the well-being of the community, which affects the next community and the next. We care about all.

II Corinthians 5:17 says: “So if anyone is in Christ, *there* is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! Another translation says, “There is a new world.” This means we do the hard work of reconciling ourselves to each other in this new way of humanity.

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Gal. 3:26-28 says: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

It means I will clothe myself with Christ and I will help create a new community (the church- the gathered believers) where there is no longer any distinction or inequality given to Jews or Greek or any other people. It also means no distinction between someone who has money and someone who doesn't, someone who has grown up in the church and someone who hasn't.

The community the author of John wrote to had serious tension between the Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah and the Jews who didn't. Their future together depended on their love for each other as does ours.

In this new created community we call out the gifts of each other. Our gifts are used for the good of all even beyond the church walls. The fruits of the spirit are evident in how we relate to each other. People are the priority in this community. We celebrate when people feel loved and secure and can be free to be creative and share their gifts passionately with others and the world. We encourage and bear each other's burdens. We yield to each other (gelassenheit) knowing that our well-being is intertwined. We meet each other's needs so there is no one in need.

Acting out of our faith and baptism in faith comes from something bigger than us. It comes from the Spirit within us, the presence of Jesus among us so that we have not built our own salvation but we are dependent on and grateful for the grace we have been given in Jesus and out of that we are given what we need to act in love.

Salvation, from the Greek word, “sozo”, when it is used in many places in the New Testament, which means to be made well or whole. Salvation can be more than a personal decision extending to a communal salvation of my well- being depends on your well-being and your well-being depends on mine. When there is a disparity between the rich and the poor and the gap keeps getting wider and we don't rub shoulders with each other anymore, the community is not being made well or whole.

(vs. 20) Sometimes we need to be saved from ourselves in order to have a faith that has legs.

There is wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers that says the hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self—to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix,

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help, save, convince, or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it.”²

We can think too highly of ourselves that we don't remember this love we have is from God who made us all or we criticize ourselves so much we flounder in our self-hatred and we can't reach out to love others. It's when we open our hearts receiving this gift of love from God that we see needs around us. We see that the person who hands us our coffee at the cafe is an actual person who came to work with whatever they are carrying inside of them. We need each other.

Laying down our life doesn't have to mean we die as in a martyr. It does mean something is given up in that passing from death into life. We pass on the sacrificial love Christ gave to us.

Someone who was known to give financially to different organizations that their church partnered with was asked, “How much do you know how to give?” And the reply they gave was, “Until it hurts.”

Oscar Romero, Archbishop in El Salvador is an example of laying down his life, literally. In 1980, he was assassinated while celebrating mass in San Salvador. A Guatemalan news correspondent reported these words from Oscar Romero in an interview just a few weeks before Romero's death. Romero says, “I have often been threatened with death. Nevertheless as a Christian, I do not believe in death without Resurrection. If this happens, my death will be for the liberation of the people and I pardon and bless whoever does it. Would that they might be convinced that they will waste their time if they do. A bishop will die but the Church of God, which is the people, will never perish.”³

Oscar Romero believed the moral test of any society is "how it treats its most vulnerable members. Romero believed that the teachings of Jesus cared about the wellbeing of all people and that we would be asked what we did when we saw Jesus in the form of someone hungry or without clothes, “Did we see them and respond?” Did we, as the Message says, “Turn a cold shoulder?”

That was an example of martyrdom, Oscar Romero knew he was a threat to the government at that time by intervening for the poor and marginalized.

² https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2009/050309_8am.html

³ Susan A. Blain, Editor, *Imaging the Word*, Vol. 3, (Cleveland.,United Church Press,1996), 206.

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In New Orleans, Alison McCrary, a social justice lawyer and closely tied to the Catholic Church is the Gospel in action in her community, seeing the needs around her. She works directly with people on Death Row and organizes 30 spiritual directors who are willing to walk with the people on Death Row. Inmates are giving ideas to her while they are in prison, ideas for blueprints for those on the outside to pass laws for change. She has seen that community can happen even in prisons. “I don’t believe in hope, Alison says. I believe in community.”

Alison thinks good theology can change the world. Being Christ-centered she sees Jesus going to the marginalized and hearing from them. She said there isn’t a day that goes by in New Orleans where you don’t think about race and your role in it. “It requires you to have your heart open, to have your heart broken, to have your heart loved, and to love other people.”⁴

One more example of giving up in order to show love:

There is a woman I am grateful to for how she did some really hard work for me, for the faith community. This woman held some pretty strong convictions about women in leadership and she had voiced her concern to the leadership when she heard that I was being hired and she voiced where she thought all this would head if we had a woman in leadership. (nowhere good) And yet it was she who accepted my invitation to show me around one of the local continuing care centers where she lived. And it was she who introduced the residents to her new transitional pastor.

She was the one who hugged me and told me she loved me on Sunday mornings. My Bible has a place with her name on the page in Zephaniah 3 where it says, “The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

She would hold both of my hands and say that blessing to me every so often, often with tears in her eyes, because you know, she was at the same time working out her own salvation inside of her, in that moment of blessing a female pastor who represented a threat to her conviction.

In that moment of blessing me and all the other times she hugged me as she went through the line after church and every time she called me Pastor Luann, she was breaking down a wall within her own heart, making space for a new creation, a new way of being people together, different than the world.

⁴ <https://nations.co/interview-alison-mccrary/>

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She had the humility to see that God could be working in this in a way that might be different than she thought and that it could be for good... if she was open. That is a story of *gelassenheit*, a yieldedness to each other for the common good.

The early Anabaptists knew being rebaptized was against the law and they were willing to risk their lives for what that meant. It wasn't a ritual that got you in. It meant I'm committed to a journey of being a part of a new people no matter how difficult, a new created people because of Christ. This is who we are.

"This is how we come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves. Vs. 16 and 17 from *The Message*.

It requires something of us to create a new humanity together, something we need to yield to and we can do this because God's mercy and love is ours to receive and give to this community and beyond.

Let us pray:

May the baptismal waters once again seep into our soul

To refresh and renew and enliven our spirit,

to love, to open our arms, to live in a way strange to the world.

May the coolness of the water flow into our eyes that we may see anew,

See with the eyes of Christ, all humanity as beloved and one with us.

May the water of grace flood over us as we fall with love and gratitude at the feet of

The One who saves us and makes us well.

Amen

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Benediction:

I want to pass on a blessing that was given to me by a woman with great humility. I invite you to take this to heart. Read it out loud to yourself every day this week. Say it to someone else. Look in their eyes and say it. Write it in a card. Pass it on.

Zephaniah 3:17

“The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

Go in peace.