

4th Sunday of Lent
March 22, 2020
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Scripture Reading:
2 Timothy 1:5-7

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

Scripture Reading:
Romans 12:9-18

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Message: *Refuse to Flatten the Curve of Our Love*

We are in a time of flux like I have never experienced before in my lifetime. I think I am staying current with the latest news and then my son in Oakland will text me with something like “The Bay Area has just been directed to shelter in place.” And I don’t even know what that means. Every day brings new information and new directives. The world is changing so fast that every evening I wonder what will happen tomorrow. We will look back on this time and recount how we lived through it and who and what we lost. Nothing feels right. I invite you to take a moment to just acknowledge the disorder we all feel.

We have already given up many things we take for granted...our sense of normalcy; the illusion of control; many of the events that bring us joy; physical connection with others; the ability to go where we want to go when we want to go; making a quick stop at the grocery store to pick up a gallon of milk. Others have had things taken from them...the ability to leave their homes, employment and health.

With this kind of upheaval we can't just pretend things haven't changed. As I read my Bible this past week I was struck by how differently I experience texts I have read my whole life. No longer can I enter the text with the same idyllic and privileged filter that I usually layer on top of scripture without even realizing it.

For example, the text I read to you from 2 Timothy 1: "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and love and self-discipline" feels especially relevant right now. Those words come from a letter Paul wrote to Timothy at time when Timothy needed to be reminded that he had been given a legacy that would aid him in facing the challenges of his time. Timothy needed to be reminded that he came from a long line of courageous people who met their challenges with courage, power, love and self-discipline. Timothy was the grandchild of Lois and the son of Eunice, after all. Paul wants him to remember that he comes from a long line of faithfulness and courage ...and self-discipline.

We also reminded to remember from whom we came. While this time feels like no other time that isn't completely true. Our ancestors have lived through plagues, the Spanish flu, the polio outbreak. In our more recent history we have seen Pearl Harbor, the AIDS epidemic and 9/11. These are events that also felt like they came at us from the side, with no preparation. It means that we have to take what we know and through courage, power and self-discipline continue to move forward in love...just as Paul reminded Timothy to do.

The other scripture I want to look at today comes from Romans, another letter from Paul. In that letter Paul is reminding the Christians in Rome of the practical ways they are called to continue following Jesus' example. Depending on what translation you use there are upwards of thirty imperatives in this scripture. Love is the theme. We think of 1 Corinthians 13 as the love chapter but once again, in Romans 12, Paul uses love as the foundation of everything. Let love be genuine. Love one another with a mutual affection. Contribute to the needs of the saints. Show hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you. So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. In other words, pattern yourself after the life and death of Jesus in which love and self-sacrifice was at the basis of every decision.

The other interesting thing about the admonitions in Romans 12 is that all of the verbs are plural. We follow Jesus together. This scripture is a window into what life in Christ looks like as a community. You can imagine Paul saying, "Don't try this alone."

I've been paying attention to the messages that other clergy leaders are speaking to their congregations during this pandemic. A few are ignoring that these times are different. I read this week about pastors who have continued to encourage their parishioners to physically come to worship. One pastor was quoted as saying, "We are raising up revivalists, not pansies." These pastors think you can't do the work of Christ if you aren't all in the same sanctuary. These are tough times and when Christians refuse to listen to our best minds telling us the best way we can take care of each other, I shudder. I wish this pastor had a Paul in his lives that would remind him that God has given our communities a spirit of courage, power and self-discipline, in which love is the underlying theme. We are supposed to be raising up communities acting in love, not mavericks acting thoughtlessly.

The good news is that the vast majority of faith leaders are inviting people to remember the values of their faith and move forward in love and self-discipline. One of the deep challenges for us during this time is that we are a community that loves each other deeply, gathers often and makes decisions together. That has become more difficult during these times, but not impossible. We do our faith journey together as a people.

So, we need to be creative about how we come together. We are learning a new skill...how we can do this work together while we enact the loving practice of social distancing? It is one of the many ways we can act in love right now... together. This church is not afraid of a challenge and it exudes creativity. Your staff is thinking all the time about ways we can connect without putting the vulnerable at risk. For example, last Sunday night our high school youth had a get together through video conferencing. Their time together began with a scavenger hunt, each playing from their own homes. What a fabulous idea of community having fun during these tricky times. We need your help to devise new and creative ways to be community to each other. Isolation is hard on our souls and we need to figure out how to connect. We need each of us to reach out in love and compassion to each other but also in service to the larger community. Let us know your ideas of how we can connect and how we can serve during this altered reality. Join us in the process of creating community.

It is also important that we get creative about how we can be people of service in a time of social distancing. Last Sunday in a sermon delivered to an empty sanctuary that was livestreamed, Rev. Miles, a priest at Trinity Church Wall Street Church said to her congregation: "Every hand we don't shake must become a phone call we make. Every inch and every foot of distance we put between

ourselves and another must become a thought about how we could help that other should the need arise.”

Our faith was born out of the love of a suffering and incarnate God. We are suited for the loving work ahead of us. Times of risk and isolation call us to live lives of advocacy, compassion and service to others. Sometimes that service means we have to be physically apart. Sometimes that service will require something else. Each day the target moves and each day we must stand up in love and figure out what our calling is for the joys and challenges of yet another day.

For we have been blessed with the deep values of love and service that were handed down to us from our spiritual ancestors....those who made the bold decision to be baptized by trine immersion in the Eder River and found themselves persecuted for their actions....those who took the practice of feet washing and made it smooth with prayer...those who took the stance of peacemaker to the point of becoming medical guinea pigs rather than serve and kill others through military servicethose who have stood in the way of tanks...those who have stood up for the inclusion of others.....those who have been allies to the farm workers.... those who joined MLK in the march from Selma to Montgomery....those who refused to let gender be a deciding factor for answering the Spirit’s nudging. We are here because of the generations of courageous people who went before us, putting their lives and reputations on the line to continue the work of Jesus during challenging times.

And now it is our turn. Romans 12 tells us to rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Right now these are the spiritual practices we will put into place together while we stay away from groups and work at flattening the curve. But true love is fervent, relentless and practical. So at the same time that we flatten the curve of the Coronavirus we should allow the curve of our love to explode exponentially.

We have cancelled many things but we have not canceled our love or our courage or our power or our self-discipline or our service to others or our community or our hope or our prayers or our faith.

Friends, resist panic, refuse to demonize, speak words of encouragement, hold fast to what is true, keep community alive and may the curve of our love explode in new and creative ways. Amen.