

### **The First Reading - Psalm 98:1-9**

<sup>1</sup> O sing to the Lord a new song,  
for the Lord has done marvelous things.  
His right hand and his holy arm  
have gotten him victory.  
<sup>2</sup> God has made known his victory;  
he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.  
<sup>3</sup> God has *remembered his **steadfast love and faithfulness***  
to the house of Israel.  
All the ends of the earth have seen  
the victory of our God.  
<sup>4</sup> Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;  
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.  
<sup>5</sup> Sing praises to God with the lyre,  
with the lyre and the sound of melody.  
<sup>6</sup> With trumpets and the sound of the horn  
make a joyful noise before the King, our God.  
<sup>7</sup> Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
the world and those who live in it.  
<sup>8</sup> Let the floods clap their hands;  
let the hills sing together for joy  
<sup>9</sup> at the presence of God, for God is coming  
to judge the earth.  
God will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with equity.

### **The Second Reading – John 15:9-17**

#### **The Message Translation**

<sup>9-10</sup> “I’ve loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you’ll remain intimately at home in my love. That’s what I’ve done—kept my Father’s commands and made myself at home in his love. <sup>11-15</sup> “I’ve told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I’m no longer calling you servants because servants don’t understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I’ve named you friends because I’ve let you in on everything I’ve heard from the Father. <sup>16</sup> “You didn’t choose me, remember; I chose you, and put you in the world to bear fruit, fruit that won’t spoil. As fruit bearers, whatever you ask the Father in relation to me, he gives you. <sup>17</sup> “But remember the root command: Love one another.

The first letter of John plainly states, “God is love.” And the Gospel of John reminds us of this truth as well for John writes, “For God so loved the world...” Apostle Paul has a few

words for us, too, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Love is central to our faith. God is love and we are commanded to love. In Deuteronomy, we hear these words, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” And in Leviticus we hear this command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” These commands are not optional, given the word “shall!” Jesus recaps these two commandments in the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. But, in John’s Gospel Jesus says to his disciples, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” How should they love one another? “Just as I have loved you,” said Jesus. Now in the New Testament, the Greek language actually has four different words for love - *storge*, *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*. The word used to describe God’s love is *agape*, for it is self-giving, sacrificial love. *Agape* seeks not selfish pleasure but rather whatever is best for the other person. This is the love God lavishly shares with you and me.

Author Rob Bell summarizes our faith this way, for he writes, “I believe that Jesus’s story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love, and it is for everybody, everywhere.”

I wonder how you would describe Jesus’ story? How would you describe our faith to someone unfamiliar with our Triune God? Would love be an integral part of the equation?

Does anybody remember when the Beatles sang, “All you need is love,” in the turbulent 1960’s? “Reactions to these lyrics came in two variations,” writes commentator David Cunningham. First, “an enthusiastic embrace of love as the simple solution to the world’s problems,” and second, “a critical rejection of love as a dreamy emotion that would distract people as the world’s problems grew worse.” This same dualistic reaction to love is acutely alive and well today in our culture. Love is seen as sweet, but not certainly not effective in solving problems in our world of escalating hate and divisions. We have blue states and red states. We have people on the left and people on the right. We have some who claim absolute truth, making all others wrong. In our world, where the commodity of fear is sold in large doses, could it be that all we really do need is love, *agape* love?

Hear Jesus again, “Remember the root command: Love one another... Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love.” “The way I loved you is the very best way,” said Jesus. So, how did Jesus love the disciples and others he encountered. If we go back to the beginning of his story, Jesus chose each of the disciples. Think about this. Jesus invited others to be in relationship with him - fishermen, tradesmen, a tax collector, and a zealot. Jesus then committed to be in relationship with them. The Gospels chronicle their time together, which is understood to be three years. Even though the disciples were slow to grasp Jesus’ teachings, Jesus persisted. Jesus stayed connected relationally always giving of himself to others, even unto death. We are not privy often to what the disciples think, but from the stories recorded in the Gospels we certainly know that they experienced, enacted, enfolded, incarnated love, in and through Jesus.

When I recall Jesus’ ministry, a number of stories and scenes come to mind that give us hints of the depth of Jesus’ love for others. In John’s Gospel, we open with a wedding feast where the best wine flowed plentifully. There are encounters between Jesus and women that shatter cultural norms: the conversations at the well with a Samaritan woman and with a woman caught in adultery. Jesus weeps for his friend Lazarus and violates the letter of the

Sabbath law to heal. The way Jesus loved his disciples and those he encountered was stunning, beautiful and expansive. Even in our passage this morning, Jesus wraps his disciples in love, for he is preparing them for what is to come in the hours ahead – an arrest, a conviction, a crucifixion. Love isn't an abstract thought or a dreamy emotion. Love is concrete, self-giving action.

I believe this is why Richard Rohr reminds us that, "You have to work to live in love," for love is a verb; an action. Love takes intention. When I do pre-marriage counseling with couples, I offer similar advice saying, "Love is choice." Saying, "I do," is only the beginning of their commitment to choose love each and every day.

"You have to work to live in love, to have a generosity of spirit, a readiness to smile, a willingness to serve," says Rohr. Regularly check in with yourself, asking, "Is my heart open? Is love flowing from me?" Is loving flowing through you and you and you and me?

This coming Tuesday, access to my online community from the Center for Action and Contemplation will end. Our community was given an extra week to digest all that has been shared and learned. The on-line postings from 116 participants living on four different continents would take volumes to print. It has been a wonderfully enriching ten-weeks sparked by Richard Rohr's book entitled, *Immortal Diamond*, Amber Griffins capable facilitation and a host of on-line conversations with other participants.

One of the questions we were asked to reflect on during this on-line course speaks to our passage this morning. Richard Rohr writes, "Love will get you to resurrection more quickly than power, office or role." How have you experienced this in your life?

"Love the way I loved you," said Jesus. Do you remember how Jesus described his love as he identified himself as the Good Shepherd? Jesus said earlier in John's Gospel, "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." He adds a bit later in the passage these words, "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." To love others the way Jesus loves makes resurrection possible for us and for others. And, I am not just talking about resurrection after death. Love will get us to resurrection - from harbored hate, from random violence, from raging anger, from deep despair, from heart wrenching betrayal, from... you fill in the blank - more quickly than power, office or role.

But, unfortunately, love is often not the schooling we receive from our culture. We are schooled in the need for power and more of it, so that we are in control. We are schooled in fear – fear of those who are not like you socially, ethnically, economically, politically, religiously. We are schooled in scarcity, that there is not enough for everyone, so protect what you have and accumulate as much as you can. We are schooled to believe that the individual is more important than the community, so get what you want even at the expense of others. Marianne Williamson makes this reality painfully clear, for she writes, "We are the only species to systematically destroy our own habitat." We are so wrapped up in fear, scarcity and individualism that we are destroying the only home we have as well as each other. We use power, office and role to secure, protect and control what we want. How is this working for us, as we peer at the condition of our world? Even if attaining power, office and role gives us the illusion of authority and control of our lives, does it usher in even a bit of heaven on earth?

Could it be that all we really do need is love, agape love? Story after story was told by participants in my online course about how love, not power or office or role, brought resurrection newness into the shattered parts of their lives. Their wounds were healed because

someone chose to extend self-giving love to them. Notice the intention, the action, the risk that led to resurrections.

“Love the way I have loved you... [then] go and bear fruit, fruit that won’t spoil.” On this day when love is celebrated by giving thanks for mothers and for all women who nurture hope, practice mercy, model strength and whose lives are sacraments of generosity, we have to ask ourselves, “Is the way in which we are living working for us?” Is the way we are living creating a more loving world? If not, then what needs to change?

The simple answer is me. I can’t change you. I can’t change those people out there. I can only open my own heart. And so, Rohr’s simple questions speaks volume to us today, “Is love flowing from me?”

Think blankets. God has wrapped and delivered each of us in love, for we were created by love. Yet, God’s love doesn’t just blanket us at birth. God’s love continually blankets us for God is love. The question for us today is this: “Are our hearts open to be blanketed by love, to receive and live from the love God continually offers us?”

Fr. Richard Rohr, Marianne Williamson, Dorothy Day and others all say that in one or another that spirituality tends to be more about unlearning than learning. Unlearning the fears and prejudices that rule our thoughts and actions. Unlearning the barrier of unworthiness or that we are not enough which prevent us from receiving God’s love back into our hearts.

As a little girl whispered to her new baby brother, “Baby tell me what heaven is like. I’m starting to forget.” We have forgotten that we are born of love. We have forgotten that we are born to love. Love is the essential reality and our purpose on earth. Yet, love is a disciplined habit. It is something we must choose each and every day, each and every moment.

Is what I am about to think, or say, or do, going to be loving? Is what I am about to think or say or do going to draw others towards the God of love I claim? Is love flowing from me. Is love flowing from you? Is love flowing from us?

Be gentle with yourself was a mantra from the online course I took, because none of us can live fully from our source of love. None of us will always be loving in thought, word or deed. Just ask my family and friends. So be gentle with yourself and then be intentional again, by choosing again and again to live in love.

As the psalmist said, “Let’s sing a new song.” Let’s counter the song being sung in our headlines of division, hate, and violence. Let’s counter with the simple melody of self-giving love through our very lives, so that our families, our coworkers, our neighbors, our community, and our world, will know us not by our fears or worries, our power or position, but by our self-giving love.

Friends, we have to work to live in love. Let’s get to work! Amen.