

First Reading of Scripture is Micah 6:6-8

⁶“With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Second Reading is John 15:12-17

¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I 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. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

The Message – Love Mends

Christmas is almost here. We will gather together for Christmas Eve Services in this sanctuary in about 30 hours! What do you still have left to do to be prepared? I know Paul and I have stuffing to make and turkeys to be smoked, which will go with us to Cerritos! What about you? Is there still shopping to do? Is there still wrapping to do? How about prep work in the kitchen like Paul and me, or any last-minute cleaning to make the house presentable for guests? In the rushing around in these final hours before Christmas, what will take center stage for you?

When I think of the couple whose newborn child came to be the reason we celebrate this season, I imagine the hours leading up to what we know as Christmas were long and exhausting. Mary was sitting atop a donkey full with child, as Joseph slowly guided them towards Bethlehem. When they arrived, there was no room in inn after inn for them. Tried, exhausted and covered in dust, an innkeeper led them to the only place he had left – his stable. There amidst the straw covered floor and the menagerie of animals they collapsed, only to be awakened by Mary’s birth pangs.

I hear echoes of what the Prophet Isaiah said, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” Indeed, the heavens were torn open and love came down on that night but not as the world expected. Love came down through a vulnerable infant, not as a conquering king with militaristic might. Love came down and only the shepherds and the wise ones knew of its coming. Love came down and grew to treat widows, orphans, outcasts, and the rejected with respect. Love came down and its source of life was a deep and abiding relationship with God.

Love came down and gave itself away for all of humanity. Love came down to mend the mess of this world.

Hear afresh this morning what this love, whom we know as Jesus said to his disciples near the end of his life, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Yet, we all know that to love as Jesus loves us is challenging, for it is heart wrenching work to mend the mess of this world.

Just ask the community of Thousand Oaks, for within 24 hours of a gunman killing a dozen people at Borderline Bar and Grill, the city was battling two wildfires and most of its residents were evacuated. No place in Thousand Oaks seemed untouched by the shooting or the fires. Yet, love came down even in a strip mall sandwich shop called Jersey Mike’s. The manager, Brian Murphy said, “I know pretty much all my customers that come in here by first name,” for Thousand Oaks is a tight knit community. His shop was unharmed and moved by love for his community he donated half a day’s proceeds to a fund which will assist victims. He said, “I wanted to do my part [in helping mend this community]”. Other businesses did the same. Rock City Studios, a performance hall and music school in the nearby city of Camarillo hosted a benefit for victim’s families and they raised about \$30,000. Owner, Ann DeMartini feels that heartbreaks are just coming too fast, for she said, “We need more love... in the world. There’s [just] not enough.”

It is heart-wrenchingly hard to mend the mess of this world as Robbie and Alissa Parker know. Their precious Emilie was one of the young victims at Sandy Hook Elementary School six years ago. Robbie and Alissa felt paralyzed by the mess of this world where random violence turned their lives upside down, causing them unimaginable pain and suffering. Alissa wrote in a blog, “There have been times where I felt like I had to hold on to the dark things, like it was some responsibility I was supposed to carry.”

For all of us, some days it just seems easier to hold onto dark things. It seems easier to hate, rather than to love. It seems easier to hold onto anger and resentment, then to forgive. It seems easier to not care about the suffering all around us. Some days it feels as if despair is all there is and every ounce of energy is needed to care for ourselves. When things go wrong all around us, when the world is such a mess, it is easy to hold on to the dark things and resign ourselves to this is just the way it is. But, to do so – to do so - is to let the darkness win.

Do you remember how John’s Gospel described the precious son born to Mary and Joseph? Listen again to John’s words: “In [this precious son] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Emilie’s mom Alissa remembers a few weeks after the tragic death of her daughter that a heating oil truck just showed up at their home. She had not called for a refill, so she wasn’t sure why it was there. But then light broke through her darkness. A family they barely knew offered this simple kindness and it became for them a sign of God’s tangible goodness and love for them, a tangible witness that the darkness had not overcome the light.

Echoes of Micah ring in our ears, “And what does the Lord require of us?” What does the Lord require of us each and every day in the face of the mess of this world? “To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.” The overwhelming responses of kindness and love gave the Parker’s strength to claim the power of God’s love, for Alissa recounted that “Emilie’s life was about color and joy, not pain and suffering.” Emilie loved mornings. Emilie loved making art. Emilie loved being fancy. Emilie’s heart was set towards others on December 10th for she had filled a box with toys and stuffed animals to be given to children in need. Alissa wrote on the first

anniversary of her daughter's death, "Love, it is so simple and yet so powerful. Love connects us all with each other."

Jesus said to his disciples, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you... and I appoint you to go and bear fruit, fruit that must endure."

People often ask in the midst of the darkness of this world, "Where is this God of love? Why didn't this God of love show up or stop this tragedy?" Alissa responds saying, "God allows us all to make our own choices, good or bad, because that's the only way good can be in us, if we freely choose it above all else." If we freely choose to love others, as God first loved us, then we can bear good fruit that will last.

As post Easter people, even as we gather to celebrate the Christ child on Christmas Eve, we know that he will grow up to suffer and die at the hands of religious and political authorities. God didn't stop this for his own son. God didn't stop the shooter at Sandy Hook or Thousand Oaks, Las Vegas or Parkland. God didn't stop the Camp or Woolsey fires that claimed lives and destroyed thousands of homes. Yet, the mess of the world doesn't mean that God is not with us and for us. The mess of the world only beckons us to freely choose love.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." In the next 30 hours what will you choose? What fruit will you choose to bear into this world with your very life that will last?

I remember the days when I worked the last 30 hours of the Christmas rush in a cosmetic department as I put myself through college. Most customers were in a hurry and they were often impatient. Tempers easily flared if what they wanted was no longer on the shelves. I would scramble to suggest suitable alternatives. Often, the whole reason for the season, celebrating the love that came down to mend the mess of this world, was lost in the attempt to fulfill a last-minute gift on a list. The fruit most prevalent wasn't love, but rotten moods.

What fruit will we choose to bear into the mess of this world, my friends? Dr. Howard Thurman suggests some thoughts for us through his poetry:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
 To find the lost,
 To heal the broken,
 To feed the hungry,
 To release the prisoner,
 To rebuild the nations,
 To bring peace among brothers [and sisters],
 To make music in the heart.

The work of Christmas begins when we freely choose love; when we choose to participate in mending the mess of this world by bearing the fruits of love that will last.

The question is: Can you and I muster this love, this love that mends the world all on our own? The answer to this question is found in the larger context of our verses from John's Gospel this morning. In the larger context Jesus reveals himself as the true vine, saying, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower." A couple of verses later Jesus says to his disciples, "I am

the vine, you are the branches.” In this metaphor, all three elements – gardener, vine and branches – are essential to the production of good fruit. The good news in this is that disciples, that is you and I, are essential. We are essential to God’s plan for mending the world, yet we only bear fruit that lasts when we are rooted in Christ: “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” We bear much fruit rooted in Christ, not apart from Christ. When we choose love, we are responding to the work of the master gardener, who sent his only son to be born in a stable in Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph.

So, what does this fruit of love look like in us? This love doesn’t give up on the other, even if the other shuts you out. This love believes in the other, even when the other doesn’t believe in her self. This love is putting someone else’s needs before one’s own. This love sacrifices for another. This love willingly lays down one’s life for another. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

It's been five years since the Disney movie Frozen hit the big screen, but it still impacts young girls. I didn’t know the story line when I went to see the movie, but what I encountered was a story of how love mends. Let me recap it for you: Two sisters, Elsa and Anna, are driven apart when Elsa fears that her magical gift will only cause destruction. Anna, though, never gives up on her sister. Anna doesn’t believe the world has to be the mess that it has become. Elsa encircles herself in fear, isolating herself from her sister and from all others. Anna though doesn’t give up on her sister even though she shuts her out. Anna believes that Elsa can be different, even when Elsa doesn’t believe it herself. Even when Anna’s own life is at stake, she summons up the courage and strength to throw herself in front of her sister, saving Elsa’s life. In that moment Elsa realizes Anna’s sacrifice. “There is no greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Anna’s selfless act of love changes everything.

Friends, this Fourth Sunday of Advent it’s obvious that our world is a mess. It is in deep need of mending. And we are essential, we must bear the fruit of love that will endure.

But do you remember what Emilie’s mom, Alyssa said? “The only way good can be in us, [is] if we freely choose it above all else.” Let us freely choose to be rooted in God’s love, so that we can tangibly do good. Let’s be tangible witnesses of God’s love, participating with God in mending the mess of this world. Amen.