

First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, March 15, 2020
Rev. Cheryl Raine

First Reading is from Matthew 25:31-40

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Second Reading is a Poem by Bishop Easterly

I do not know exactly what lies ahead; how far we will have to travel on the road of unrest. I cannot foretell the number of bombs that will have to explode or the lives that will have to be lost before... Before we understand that we cannot kill each other into the future we think we have imagined. You cannot hate enough to make yourself happy. You cannot destroy enough to make yourself feel secure. You cannot oppress enough to make yourself feel superior. You cannot commit enough evil to make yourself feel holy.

I do not know exactly what lies ahead; how far we have to travel on the road of unrest. I cannot foretell how many rights will have to be taken away or how much progress will have to be reversed before... Before we understand we cannot persecute each other into the future we think we have imagined. We cannot neglect each other enough to feel worthy. We cannot starve each other enough to feel full. We cannot silence one another enough to feel heard. We cannot fragment each other enough to feel whole.

I do not know exactly what lies ahead; how far we have to travel on the road of unrest. I cannot foretell how many bodies will have to float on the sea of greed and vain glory before... Before we understand that we cannot bully our way into the future we think we have imagined. We cannot bury each other deep enough to feel alive. We cannot abuse each other enough to feel loved. We cannot infect each other enough to feel well. We cannot enslave one another enough to feel free.

Before it is too late may we understand that the call is coming from inside the house. Before it is too late may we comprehend that the stench, rot, brokenness, emptiness, insecurity, woundedness, disease is from within and not without. Erasing you will not heal me. May we understand before it is too late, God, help us to understand before it is too late.

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The Message is entitled, *Within, Not Without*

I don't know if any of us ever imagined this morning, before we arrived. I know this past week has been filled with news and more news about coronavirus, as we all try to grasp the complexity and severity of what we are facing. I would not be honest, if I said fear hasn't tried to take up residency in my psyche. Yet, the question that has been ruminating more deeply on my mind and heart all week rather than fear is what will my response be to this crisis as a person of faith? What will be our collective response as God's people at the heart of this particular city? How is our faith to inform our response to this crisis?

Let me walk us through our overarching story of faith this morning: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." In the first chapter of Genesis the creation story unfolds culminating with the creation of humankind in the image of God. As the first chapter closes, we learn that "God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good."

You and I are part of the declaration "very good." We were created by God and given the breath of life by God. All of humanity in our wonderful diversity is precious and honored and loved by God, for God is love declares the writer of the First Letter of John. "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." We are loved by God and we are to abide in God's love. Love is our tap root, our source, our well spring. The writer of 1st John continues saying, "Love has been perfected among us in this abiding... [for] there is not fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

Yet, we all know that love has not yet been perfected in any of us. We are all works in progress. Yet, love was perfected in the One who tore open the heavens and came to pitch his tent among us, the Word made flesh, Emmanuel, for God with us. When Jesus walked among us with his disciples, this perfect love was demonstrated again and again through his actions of lifting up the marginalized while calling the powerful to account.

As was read today, "Come you are blessed... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of the one human family, you did it to me." "Just as you did it... you did it to me," for Apostle Paul reminds the church in Rome, saying, "We do not live to ourselves."

This is the faith we claim, my friends, and it was a risky way to live long before this current health crisis. To use our lives for others, as Christ did, puts everything and I mean everything on the line. "We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves," says Apostle Paul. "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

I am not trying to make light of the reality of death for any of us at any time in our lives, including now. Nor am I making light of the reality of death for those most vulnerable to this particular virus. I am just trying to remind us whose we. We belong to God. We are God's precious children and maybe this will help us live faithfully as we respond to this current crisis. Will our faith help us to be a beacon of hope for others?

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Before, I knew what would unfold this Sunday, I entitled my message, "Within, Not Without." Bishop Easterly's prayer *Before it is Too Late* is timely this morning. Before it is too late sounds like the alarm that has rippled through China, Europe and now our nation this past week. Yet, before it is too late will we realize that all of God's creation spoken of in Genesis is interconnected and interdependent? Before it is too late will we realize that we are really just one human family? Before it is too late will we realize that we are all stewards of each other and of this one beautiful blue planet? Before it is too late will we seek to abide ever more deeply in the love that created us for more than just ourselves?

I subscribe to a magazine that shares stories about people building a better world. Here is a recent email from this magazine, "Yesterday my co-worker Camille returned from the grocery store, rattled by a scene unimaginable just days ago. Our neighborhood market had been transformed: extra-long lines, parents in tears over empty shelves, and a shopper carrying a shotgun ready to defend his right to limited supplies." I have heard similar stories by word of mouth or by Facebook shares this week. These occurrences are the latest reminder of the new world we're living in because of the coronavirus.

The email continues stating, "An extraordinary unraveling is occurring, and no one will be untouched. The social and economic disruptions of this crisis will be deep, broad, and long lasting. [Yet,] in the face of an overwhelming tidal wave of bad news, fear-mongering, and finger-pointing, what we need most right now are daily reminders of our better human selves, so that each of us can rise to this challenge. There are thousands of inspiring, creative community responses to this pandemic and these stories must be told and widely shared." This magazine, which is named *YES!* will be covering "all the beautiful ways communities are stepping up their compassion and people power in this challenging time."

"We need reminders of our better human selves." We need to tap ever more deeply into the source of love that enables us to be love into this world even in the midst of this crisis. How will we be God's love for each other, for our community and for our world in the coming days, weeks and months even if we can no longer gather together as we are doing today?

How will we intentionally stay connected? How will we listen deeply to each other, especially those who are most vulnerable and isolated? How will we be the church in the midst of this crisis? How might we use this crisis to be the church that God dreams of?

I suggest we have to look within, not without. Or as Bishop Easterly writes, "Before it is too late may we understand that the call is coming from inside the house." When Christ was in his final hours he was his better human self. He didn't blame others instead he said, "Father, forgive them they know not what they do." He wasn't concerned with just himself for he said to his mother, "Woman, behold thy son! Behold, thy mother!" uniting Mary and John in the face of his death. He didn't condemn others for their wrongs even though they deserved punishment, for he said to a thief, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Jesus' better human self was fueled by his abiding in God and God abiding in him.

Will we abide in God's love drawing forth from each other our better human selves? I pray so, my friends, I pray so. Amen.