

Chaos or Community? Wednesday, 2/17/21

“We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.” So said Martin Luther King, jr. in a 1964 speech in St. Louis.¹ The context was the civil rights movement, but those words ring true for all of humanity across all of time. Even a casual reading of the Bible reveals the two basic ways we fall short in this life: We fail to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; And we fail to love our neighbor, which is, after all, just another way of demonstrating that we really do love God. Rhetoric is always a little more impactful when delivered in sharply contrasting opposites, so Dr. King chose to characterize this struggle as the choice between chaos or community.² Will we choose to build a community with others that ushers in the Kingdom of God, a community where our attitudes and actions are marked by the love of God and others, or will we choose to build our own private kingdoms based on love of self? It’s a question posed over and over again in the Bible, where we read verses like these from Deuteronomy:

“Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live! You can make this choice by loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and committing yourself firmly to him. This is the key to your life. And if you love and obey the LORD, you will live long in the land the LORD swore to give your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”³

Or as Jesus put it in the Gospel of Matthew:

“You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: Love your neighbor as yourself. The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”⁴

We use the word “love” rather freely in our culture, and oftentimes that leads us astray. We might all say we want lives filled with love, but what that love looks like might

¹ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-jan-19-me-10002-story.html>

² Bishop Michael Curry, p. 5. *Love Is the Way*. Avery, 2020.

³ Deuteronomy 30:19-20. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

⁴ Matthew 22:37-40. Ibid

suggest radically different paths to get there. Tonight, we begin our Lenten study of the way of love, inspired by the book by Bishop Michael Curry, “Love is the Way.” The thesis of our journey together is that while God is love, love is not God. In other words, love is a person, revealed to us especially in the life and teaching of Jesus. Love is not an abstract ideal, a code of morality, or just feelings of attachment or good will. The way of love, then, is the way of God, and in particular, the way of Jesus. Over the weeks of Lent, we’ll explore together the definition of love, God’s loving way of making us new, love’s radical call on our lives, love’s refusal to leave any one behind, love’s power to bring us together as sisters and brothers, love’s sacrifice on the cross, and ultimately, love’s defeat of death seen in the empty tomb. Through it all, our Lenten disciplines will be aimed at growing in commitment and action in following the Jesus way of love.

Our Lenten journey on the way of love begins with an examination of our hearts. In truth, that never really ends. To follow Christ is to commit to the regular examination of our allegiances, motives, attitudes, and deeds. If there’s any good news on Ash Wednesday, it’s this: God never left us on our own to figure this out! Getting a clean heart is not about following a forty-day program to a better you, because it’s simply not something we can do apart from God. That’s what I love about the fifty-first Psalm that we heard from earlier. “Create in me a clean heart, O God.”⁵ Of all the things we could ask of God, isn’t that a prayer that God loves to answer? I think that’s the prayer that God is eagerly waiting for us to pray. I’m guessing that most of us do want to have clean hearts. Most of us do want to travel the way of love with a clean conscience and all the right motives. But we can never get there apart from God, and in particular, God’s Holy Spirit. We absolutely need the power of God’s Spirit to reveal spiritual truths to us, to reveal our own hearts, and to sanctify our hearts, our mouths, our hands and feet, making them holy so that we can be instruments of God’s holiness in this world. It’s all up to God, but we have to first choose to yield our hearts and our lives into God’s control. Create in us a clean heart, O God.

Besides a clean heart, another thing we desperately need as we embark on this way of love is a clear vision for where we’re going. The apostle Paul describes such a vision quite

⁵ Psalm 51:10. Ibid.

concisely in his letter to the Colossians, which we also heard from earlier. Who of us doesn't long to have an abundance of these qualities in our lives: tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, peace, thankfulness, and wisdom. Surely these are some of the most beautiful marks of the way of love. I'm going to read them again, and as I do, I invite you to let them soak into your hearts like water soaks into the parched earth: tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, peace, thankfulness, and wisdom. That's the hopeful message of Lent. That God really can give us a clean heart and give us the strength and guidance we need to walk the way of love.

But lest I make all this sound too easy, let's also temper our hope with the realistic expectation that growing in love can't happen without also confronting the ugliness of sin in our lives. It is Ash Wednesday, after all, and the ashes remind us of the parts of our lives we'd rather hide away and pretend never existed. Let's hear again from Paul, this time from his letter to the church in Rome. I'm reading from the 12th chapter, beginning with verse 3, in the New Living Translation.

{Read Romans 12:3-5, 9-19, 21 NLT}

Besides "love," the one word that most comes to mind for me when I hear that passage is humility. Isn't it sinful pride that usually derails our journey along the way of love? Pride leads us to think that we're better than we really are, but love allows a more sober reckoning. Pride pretends that we can do it all alone, but humility recognizes that we're all part of a body, and we belong to and need each other. Pride take credit for acts of love to establish the minimum daily requirement. Humility recognizes that just as there's no end to our own need for God's love, there's no such thing as loving others too much. Pride is impatient to get to the finish line. Humility follows the way of love with patience, trusting in the Lord. Pride can't be bothered to change plans. Humility practices hospitality whenever given the chance. Pride keeps score. Humility is glad that the scoreboard has been erased. Pride pretends to know it all. Humility listens and learns from others.

Somewhere between our plea to God to give us a clean heart, and the vision of what a loving community could really look like, lies the nitty gritty of living our daily lives. How do we do it? How do we wake up each day and not despair that another day has passed

without any forward progress along the way of love? The answer is we do it together, and we do it one step at a time. A well-known Chinese proverb reads, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”⁶ So, too, does the way of love. But this journey is one that we necessarily take with God and God’s people. Because the choice of community over chaos requires that we begin to live out the reality of that beloved community each day.

In your Lent kit this year, you should have received some felt hearts. Keep one in your pocket or stick it somewhere you’ll see it each morning. The hearts are intended to be a daily reminder to you to do two things: Take a step forward in love for God and take a step forward in loving a neighbor. What that might look like depends on the unique ways God made you, but we’ve also included in your lent kit a card that you can use as a prompt for some different ways to express love. The prompts appear in two traditional categories: Acts of piety and acts of mercy. Acts of piety are designed to grow our love of God, and include things like prayer, Bible reading, worship, and faith sharing. Acts of mercy are intended to grow our expression of love for others, and include things like feeding the hungry, offering encouragement, and seeking justice.

The important thing is that you do something that moves you forward, something that signals your commitment to choose community over chaos, life over destruction, humility over pride. And remember, your progress on this journey of love isn’t all up to you. God’s Spirit is eagerly awaiting your invitation to fill your heart and change your life. And God’s people, your sisters and brothers, actually need to be in ministry with you in order to fulfill their loving roles in the Body of Christ. So reach out to others this lent, and choose to walk the way of love together.

Please take some time now to reflect on how you will choose community over chaos this Lent. If you like, please share a comment or a prayer.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_journey_of_a_thousand_miles_begins_with_a_single_step



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