

Beginnings: Genesis 1:1-2:4a & Matt 28:16-20

Throughout the week, a similar sentiment kept rising from divergent people from diverse pockets of my life. Every so often a refrain would surface which went something like this, “I thought we had come so far ... I keep praying for peace in our nation but it doesn’t seem to come. 2020 needs to be cancelled: crazy insects, a pandemic, social fracturing, ceaseless murder; I can’t take much more.”

As the week progressed, and these thoughts and feelings were surfacing from here and bubbling up over there, I kept reading our texts for the week. I kept in it. I read and reread the story of the seven days of Creation in Genesis and the Great Commission in Matthew.

Each morning, as I sat in my usual space for meditation and contemplation, I secretly wondered just what was so good about this creation. Our reading in Genesis says, God created the world and saw that it was good. But, over the last few weeks it hasn’t really felt all that good. And, just when I thought it couldn’t feel much worse, a man with the power to heal or the power to divide chose the latter. He heartlessly cleared a group of people exercising their 1st Amendment right in order to hold a Bible upside down in front of a church he never has and never will step foot inside of.

In posing the way he did, he desecrated holy ground. He invaded the sanctuary of a community of Christians who were already grappling with following Jesus in this age of tumult. He came not to pray. He did not come to build solidarity with the oppressed. He did not come to love the American people into peace. He came to claim their space. He came to claim their religion to serve his own purposes. His actions align with Karl Marx’s declaration that religion is the opioid of the masses. Religion, which seeks to connect to power, to draw close to empire building, and to uphold division and notions of an “us” and “them”, serves as a drug for those seeking to dominate and rule over others. It corrupts the spirit of a person and the soul of a society.

This is exactly the kind of religion Jesus came to upend. Jesus came because something had happened to all that Creation “goodness”. Humankind had fallen from grace and the world was no longer only full of good. There was evil in the world: poverty, hunger, slavery, domination, prejudice, violence, division, greed and on and on. This evil went so far as to crucify Jesus Christ, but, it did not win.

Christ was resurrected and the story of hope and redemption lived on. So, too, did the powers of this world which sought to end God’s love on Earth. Jesus’ death and resurrection did not magically erase the evil of this world.

Instead, Jesus tells his followers that work is ours. We are to carry on his charge emboldened by the power of the Holy Spirit with us. Emboldened by the Spirit of Truth, the Advocate, and the Comforter, we need to go out and do the work of Jesus. Our reading in Matthew this morning tells us our work is to go out and make disciples. It instructs us to teach them the commandments

of Christ. We are to teach them to love God with all their hearts and with all their souls, and to love their neighbor (all of their neighbors) as themselves.

What a task? What a daunting a task?!? It is ripe with uncomfortable connotations of a “One True Religion” and the imperialistic expansion of Western culture. It is ripe with the possibility of self-righteousness.

For this recovering fundamentalist-raised Christian, it wreaks havoc on what it means to love someone else. How can I love someone by telling them what they should believe and should do with their lives? Feeling conflicted, I turned to the original biblical Greek for help. I found the word translated as “teach” in our reading is “didasko.” Didasko means to hold discourse with others for means of instruction. In Matthew, Jesus is telling us to converse with others so as to communicate our understanding of God’s love and the beloved-ness of all of God’s Creation.

As we watched from our socially distanced lives, American cities exploded in 400 years of repressed tension. It is easy to feel overwhelmed. As we live in the relative quiet of Western Massachusetts, it is also easy to think this is not our problem. We *are* good people who do the best we can. Creation *is* ultimately good; therefore, it will correct itself in time.

I’m with you if that is where you find yourself. I understand that feeling, and the Book of Matthew, unequivocally, reminds us following Jesus is not a “wait for God to get it done” spirituality. We have been commissioned to share God’s love as broadly and widely as possible. We are called to spread God’s love as deeply as possible. Here in Westhampton, and across the Pioneer Valley.

An amazing and beautiful world would be created if this love grew so strong and so deep centuries long divisions were mended. I imagine it starting right here in our corner of the world (here in Westhampton) before gently spreading to Northampton, to Easthampton, to Holyoke, and to Springfield. Maybe it would go clear across the state to Boston?

God’s love becoming so infectious it goes viral. Perhaps, it goes so viral that it reaches NYC. Maybe all the way to Washington DC?

When we allow the story of Jesus to infect our hearts and souls, it can be amazing how the love just pours out. I long for such a contagion of love. It would be a new beginning: a rebirth into looking across the expanse of the natural world and calling it good.

The kind of love Martin Luther King highlighted when he taught about God’s love. Dr. King led his movement of non-violent resistance exemplifying Christ’s call in Luke to “love your enemies;” and “to good to those who hate you.”

With all that is happening in Washington, and all that isn’t happening to build our society into a beacon of freedom and justice, I find myself asking who will lead us out of *this* mess. Who will God speak through next? In many ways, this has been the modus operandi of our society

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throughout my lifetime. We look for who will lead: who will be our guide through the troubles of our times. Many in our society are in a holding pattern. They are waiting for the next Dr. King to take the lead on aligning our society with the Kingdom of God. They are waiting for a prophet to arise and show exactly what part they are to play in God's reign. Just as Christians have waited two thousand years for the return of Christ. We wait for the prophet of our generation to lead us out of our troubles. And, just as Christians have found over and over again for two thousand years, such waiting must be done with active intention. We must work while we wait.

We must work like Dr. Deborah Frank. Dr. Frank is a physician in Boston who spent her career of nearly 40 years working to better the lives of children. She was an early innovator in the notion that food is medicine. She advocated for her young patients above and beyond the call of a dedicated physician by collecting food for them before going on to start a food pantry. She taught the medical students in her charge to look at the whole patient and care for the totality of a child's needs. She taught them to not look away from the impact of food insecurity.

A former patient, Justina Riopelle, first came to see Dr. Frank when she was four years old and weighed a mere 27 pounds. Now, at 19 and a full-time college student, Justina says, "Dr. Frank was a savior for me ... I went through a lot of traumatic things We were poor. We were in one bedroom. All four of us sleeping in one bed. [Dr. Frank] made sure we had food in our house. She's very enthusiastic about her patients."

Dr. Frank is an enthusiastic doer. God's movement in her life is the tenacity to help patient after patient. It is the wherewithal to share their stories to those eager to hear, and to those who would rather not listen. It is the fortitude to move her colleagues to do more and be more for their patients. Dr. Frank is a living example of God speaking and moving in the world in our own time and in our own backyard. God is alive!

We need more Dr. Franks. We need more of the ones who will tell anyone within ear shot that our government's political choices are written on the bodies of its people. She's quick to point out that food insecurity is absurd. She says, "We're not in a famine. We're not in a war zone. Babies are the canaries in the coal mine. They're growing very fast with deprivation and illness." She continues, "I think it's shocking. And, it's stupid. We've done lots of work to show that food insecurity costs Massachusetts about 2.4 billion in health and special education costs. Here we are disabling a whole new generation ... for lack of investment in food, which in our country is relatively cheap."

In a way, Dr. Frank is doing her part to answer what Martin Luther King called the drain of "nobodiness". In one of his last interviews in 1967, Dr. King said, "Nobody really knows what it means to be a negro unless one experiences it... We have to deal with the constant drain of nobodiness."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was martyred, like many of the early Christ followers before him, for calling for genuine equality: for an elimination of the notion of Jew and Gentile; of an "us" and

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“them”, of a deserving and an undeserving, of a someone and a no one. His calls for economic justice and the elimination of slums challenged a political structure still at work today in the lives of so many Americans.

So, what are we do to do? Our readings this morning remind us that we must work. God worked for 6 days before seeking one day of rest and renewal. Matthew tells the story of a Jesus who leaves us with the commandment to love: to love God with all our hearts, with all our soul and with all minds and to love, love, love our neighbor as we would love ourselves.

Love everyone – even the one we cannot comprehend, even the one we cannot stand. Our present reality is out of harmony with the eternal life God calls us to. Dr. King said it this way, "Somehow the is-ness of our present nature is out of harmony with the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts us. And this simply means this: that within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, there is some good. When we come to see this, we take a different attitude toward individuals. The person who hates you the most has some good in him; even the nation that hates you most has some good in it; even the race that hates you most has some good in it. And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every man and see deep down within him what religion calls 'the image of God,' you begin to love him in spite of. No matter what he does, you see God's image there. There is an element of good in your enemy. And as you seek to hate him, find the center of goodness and place your attention there and you will take a new attitude."

You will have a new attitude: a new creation will be formed. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth and all the creatures within it. God created humankind in God's image. God breathed life into each and every one of us no matter what we look like today. And, God called it good. Let the God which resides in you reach out in love to someone else. Then, let that love go viral.