

Giving It Our All 3.22.2020

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

by Rev. Emilia Halstead

*The religion scholar said, "A wonderful answer, Teacher! So lucid and accurate—that God is one and there is no other. And loving him with all passion and intelligence and energy, and loving others as well as you love yourself. Why, that's better than all offerings and sacrifices put together!" When Jesus realized how insightful he was, he said, "You're almost there, right on the border of God's kingdom."*

(Mark 12:32-34, the Message)

This morning, I want to start by sharing just a bit about the power of synchronicity that I experienced this week. For those who would like a definition: Synchronicity is an experience of two or more events which occur in a meaningful manner, but which are causally un-related. In order to be 'synchronistic', the events must be related to one another temporally, and the chance that they would occur together by random chance must be very small.

As I mentioned last week, here at First Church in Concord, NH for Lent we have a different object on our altar that ties to our Lenten theme for the day. The theme for today is "Sustain me." You might also remember that I mentioned that the objects I intentionally chose for the altar space each week are items that one might use on a wilderness trek. Back in January, I decided that I wanted a metal canteen, to symbolize water on the altar. Physical water being that which sustains all of us, and Jesus (whom we are following through the wilderness) is called the spiritually sustaining Living Water.

Well I looked high and low for a metal canteen, I asked several folks who used to be Boy Scouts, and there simply wasn't one to be found. So members of my congregation brought a really cool ceramic jug that looks like something

that might have been used “back in the day,” which is what we have on the altar. I'll bring it up close for everyone at home to see...

Here's where the synchronicity comes in... this week, while I was planning the worship service for today, I found out that today, March 22, 2020 is the United Nations' “World Water Day.” And I burst out laughing, because this is how the Holy Spirit regularly shows up in my life, to remind me that I'm not alone, to remind me that God is an active part of my life – and to remind me that the Divine loves to PLAY and be present in all aspects of our lives.

In addition, last week, a clergy colleague shared something that she had written in seminary, during systematic theology, which poetically described how water is present and holy throughout the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament,

using the voice of water in the “first person.” It was glorious!

In addition, (in addition, like a PPS in a letter) last week I had another clergy colleague share her first time experience using a “float pod,” which is a new offering that many spas are providing. The water in the float pod is designed to closely resemble the ph and mineral balance of the Dead Sea. Hence the “floating” due the amount of epsom salts put in the water.

The gift of water refreshes us in many more ways than hydration. Water delights all 5 senses and our souls. Water has the ability to sustain us...

...so that we can give it our all. What is the “it” you may be asking? According to our scripture passage this morning, the

“it” to which we are asked to give our all – is love. Making love our primary goal, in everything we do, is to give Love our all.

In our passage today, a scribe of one of the Jewish religious traditions at the time, comes to Jesus with a desire to actually be in conversation with, rather than setting out to trap him. In essence the scribe asks Jesus, “So, what matters?” Jesus answer, tells the scribe that everything is centered on “Who is God” and “Who is neighbor.” With breathtaking and beautiful clarity, Jesus tells him that Love is what matters most, always and forever.

The scribe, rather than saying “No” as other religious leaders had done or even say “Yes, that's correct” and then depart trying to think of other ways to trip up Jesus, the Scribe takes the classic theater or improv move, which gives life to

every scene and conversation and says, "Yes, and..." because what matters has finally gotten through to the Scribe and provided a moment of reorientation for him.

*A wonderful answer, Teacher! So lucid and accurate—that God is one and there is no other. And loving him with all passion and intelligence and energy, and loving others as well as you love yourself. Why, that's better than all offerings and sacrifices put together!"*

Jesus response, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God..." isn't an indication that this man is about to die, as our Christian theologians from 900CE onward would have us believe. But rather, Jesus is saying that the veil has become incredibly thin and this man is almost able to see that God's kingdom is present, on Earth, when love is seen as what matters most.

Another way of saying that? It is possible to live in Paradise, everyday, if we hold Love as our main focus and give it our all.

The other major theme of our passage this morning, from Jesus is this: "Our religious system has become a system of oppression and therefore, it needs to come down." This becomes the chief charge that the religious authorities hold against Jesus, and eventually charge him with.

As I pointed out last week, this is not a place of indictment against the Jewish Tradition versus the Christian tradition. Jesus is talking about ANY religious institution or system that impoverishes people for it's own gain. Believe me, the Christian tradition has PLENTY of that in it's own history and it's modern permutations. Even within the United Church of

Christ, it's important for us to look at our religious system and ask, "what of our traditions and system had ceased being life-giving?" and "In what ways have we added to the burden of poverty, rather than helping to lessening that burden?" and "Who would we be as a religious institution if there were no longer people who needed our 'help?'"

The last section of our passage for today is "traditionally" called "the Widow's mite" and is quite often used in Stewardship sermons to try and get people to give as much money to the church as possible, holding up the widow as a shining beacon of generosity – giving all of her money to God. ...Cause, that doesn't invite people to stay impoverished or anything...

Rather, I learned this week from Professor Kathryn Schifferdecker that this last section of our passage is yet

another moment when Jesus is condemning the religious hierarchy for putting the widow in a position of extreme poverty, in the first place. Out of that poverty she gives all that she has, and the religious system takes it from her.

This interpretation fits with the flow of the rest of the passage, as just before it, in the NRSV translation Jesus says, "[The religious leaders] devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Throughout Mark's gospel, especially once Jesus is in Jerusalem as he has been in our last few passages, Jesus' message holds an underlying, and sometimes outright, condemnation of any religious edifice that extorts money from the poor, to make lavish the lives of those in power of the religious system, at the peril of widows, orphans, and foreigners.

As Jesus states in our passage this morning and the Scribe affirms, "Love of God and Love of neighbor as of Self are more important than any sacrifices, or offerings, or religious institutions, or religious laws."

Love of God and Love of neighbor is where true discipleship happens.

So how, oh how, do we do that? How do we make Love the number one goal, the highest focus of EVERYTHING we do - Especially as more and more people are practicing physical distancing right now? I have an idea I'd like to share. First, through, I will share a love letter from God to each and everyone of us as written down by Rev. Kirk Byron Jones, in his book called "Soul Talk":

*Dear Child,*

*I love you for you. Let go and let yourself feel loved. All the love you deserve and thought you never had is yours – right now, but you must let me love you. All the sunshine in the world means nothing if you won't see the light or feel the warmth. Let me love you, and then – live my love.*

*Love you Madly,*

*God*

That's step one, Beloved Community. Each of us needs to allow God's love to dance in our whole being. If we allow the love of God to infuse with every moment of every day, then we will ALWAYS have enough to give back to God, as well as to share with our neighbor and with ourselves.

Without the regular eternal infusion of Divine love, we start to do things like... hoard. We hoard our love. AND we cut

off the never ending stream of Love from God. Why we do both of those at the same time, I don't know – I just know that we do. When we refuse to feel God's love and hoard our love we start to hoard other things – like toilet paper and hand sanitizer and medical masks and neoprene gloves. Because without God's Love in everything we do, we start to slide back into doing everything out of fear. ALL of our fears.

If this sounds WAY to simplified, and is making you say, “It cannot be that easy.” To that I say, “It can be. It is, that easy.” Having God's love as our guiding light in all things is as simple as drinking – at least - 8 cups of water a day, to make sure the body is hydrated.

Here's something I'd like everyone to try: whenever you take a drink of water, throughout the day, take a moment to open your soul and receive God's love. Then say, “I love you God.

Thank you for your love for me.” Feel free to use whatever name for the Divine most resonates with you. Then say, “God, please send Love to everyone on the planet, we need Your love now more than ever.”

Getting in the habit of doing that every time we take a drink of water, will “hydrate” us with love in such a powerful way that peace, hope, and joy will quickly flow into our lives too. Remember, it's up to you to turn on the powerful flow of God's Love in your life. The flow of Love is always there, we humans just get in the habit of thinking we need to earn God's Love, so we shut it off the flow of Love when we are feeling worthless.

No matter what you've done, or left undone, God's love is available to you 24/7. Please, please, please...accept it. Let it flow. I need you to feel that love. Humanity needs you to

feel that love. The planet needs you to feel that love. God needs you to feel that love. You need you to feel that love.

Because – once we are fully, deeply, madly open to the Love of God – then some truly incredible things can and will begin to happen. Amen.