

“God of Uniting and Reuniting”
Rev. Ross Varney, April 5, 2020

This Palm Sunday is now the third Sunday of having “virtual worship,” connecting by computers and phones, and it feels like forever! We keep asking, When will the infection curve flatten? How can we best stay safe? How do I find some refuge, and sanity? The uncertainty is perhaps the worst thing. We may even wonder if the coronavirus is some sort of “plague” or punishment, like in the time of Moses and the Pharaoh. I hope we shun the notions of direct correlation between suffering, sin, and punishment. I hope we remember that in the story of the “man born blind,” Jesus was quite clear that suffering is not always the result of some sin. (“It rains on both the just and the unjust” is another saying where Jesus points to elements of freedom and randomness in the universe; a virus, like cancer, can infect both the just and the unjust.)

Palm Sunday is always a mixed bag, an interplay between a “Triumphal Entry” of Jesus with palms waving, and the reality that he is moving towards his betrayal and death.... Between the praise and the passion, the crown of glory and the crown of thorns. And perhaps now we could say: the crown of a virus (“corona” meaning crown). What kind of coronation do we see with Jesus this Holy Week?

While Jesus came to teach LOVE, for neighbor, even for enemy, and even to “give one’s life for a friend,” this Palm Sunday, the coronavirus is causing great suffering, not only physical illness and death, but separating people, distancing us all. So we yearn for connection, for uniting and re-uniting. We yearn to close the gaps in any way we can. Let me share with you, from my home piano, a song that describes how we are “Locked Inside Our Skin.” It is by Ken Medema, who was supposed to be giving a concert this afternoon(!), rescheduled for November 8.

“Locked inside our skin, we live so far apart; and what I wouldn’t give to hear the beating of your heart. Trapped inside this flesh, as if inside some shell. Isolation day to day, we do not do it well! Here we stand, so many separate people longing to be known, trying to deal with the ache that we feel, because we hate to be alone. God of uniting, we stand in your presence, and this is what we pray: “Close the gap, with every passing day!” Soon the day will dawn. We’ll know when we’ll be known. All things will be new again, and all the world be one. But this is not that day; tomorrow is not here. Dare we take the risks of love, and join to face our fears?”

So how do we close the gaps, the distances that we are all feeling? We can start with Jesus’ Way, particularly that of HUMILITY. From our gospel reading, we hear that Jesus entered the holy city, humble, mounted on a colt, a young donkey. And from the Philippians 2 reading, we hear that he was “born in human likeness,” and “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.” So he had no need to show any superiority, no need to be worshipped, no need to show oneness with God, but born as a human he “grew in wisdom and in stature,” experiencing what we all experience.

Christianity is well suited to speak to times of crisis and suffering. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote a book entitled “The Crucified God.” His idea is that Christ’s passion and death is also a death “within God.” When people ask where is God, or how could God let this happen, Christianity looks through the lens of Christ, and thus envisions a God who also weeps over tragedies, as we saw Jesus weep on several occasions. We think of the divine love in Jesus that was a “suffering love,” a love full of deep compassion, without needing to control everything, but allowing freedom in all of creation, and unfortunately that includes viruses.

In this current crisis, we can benefit greatly from the HUMILITY of love. We can receive help from other countries, and learn from them

(We just accepted masks from China). We can learn to value teamwork: scientists, economists, politicians all need each other! By becoming fully human, the Spirit of God chose and accepted humility, and vulnerability. Though we may not choose it, we are currently “being humbled” by this virus; we are being brought to our knees. We are learning how interdependent we are, how much we need one another. So we are finding many ways to unite and reunite ... Zoom meetings for business, family, or friends, parking lot tailgate gatherings, and one very helpful relief: even some crazy jokes! Humor and Humility have the same root (humus = earth), so we can be healthily “grounded” with love as laughter, some comic relief! (You can look up your own; plenty of jokes out there, some even “going viral!”)

Theologian Paul Tillich once said that LOVE is the “drive to re-unite the separated.” And since God is Love (simplest definition of God), then the work of God is the work of uniting and re-uniting. We unite with others when we can forgive, when we give up the need to insist who is right and wrong, superior and inferior, good and evil. Love with humility also unites in teamwork and interdependence, with emphasis on WE, rather than the solitary ego. Love infused with humility will work at community, unity, uniting and re-uniting, even across miles, even with wireless connections.

As we sing this last song, let’s change all first person singulars to the plural, I to WE, me to US. *“Great is Your faithfulness, morning by morning new mercies we see. All we have needed, Your hand hath provided, Great is Your faithfulness, God unto us.”* We are indeed all in this together, and we have a God, made known especially in Jesus, who walks with us, suffers with us, weeps with us, and lifts us up with new hope and courage. Amen.