

“Love, In Community”

Rev. Ross Varney, April 19, 2020

This is the “Easter season” in the Christian church year. As such, we usually tell stories about resurrection, or new life, which is difficult when we are reportedly at the height of a virus pandemic. There are so many stories about people dying, or about shortages of masks and ventilators. Thank goodness Springtime coincides nicely with the Easter season, since in the Spring we see and hear all kinds of new life happening! I’m sure we all can name many things, like little peepers out at Maudslay Park, forsythia bushes that tend to blossom early, and the daffodils on the rail trail down near the river! (They are just now beginning bloom, and soon will be a lovely array of yellow!).

If Springtime can give us a sense of new growth, and new life in nature, it calls us to ponder how new life can happen in the human sphere, in body, and in spirit. We know there are many stories in the present time of people with “near death” experiences, who were in some sort of coma and then “came back” to live more months or years. Our scripture this morning comes from the devotional booklet “These Days,” and tells about a woman named Tabitha (or Dorcas).

The story appears in Acts Chapter 9. Tabitha was a great seamstress, leading a ministry of clothing (think, Thrift Shop!). Our sister churches in Chile (the Pentecostal Church of Chile) even named a mission group after her. We recall that she died, and after her friends had washed her body, she was brought back to life by Peter. The author of the devotional makes a great point - that usually we think about Peter, and how he must have had special power, a direct pipeline to God. And we wonder things like how long Dorcas had been dead? Perhaps it was a coma. I wonder about why Peter asked everyone else to leave the room, and what else Peter might have said besides “Get up.” I wonder if Peter might have invoked the name of Jesus. Maybe he chanted and sang to her; maybe he add the “laying on of hands?” And I wonder about how WE can be channels of God’s life-giving, resurrecting power?

Well.... The author of the devotional commentary, Rev. Scott Clark, made a very interesting interpretive leap. Rather than considering some amazing power of Jesus or Peter (or the prophet Elijah who brought a boy back to life), the author points to the “community of widows” and their LOVE for Dorcas! They were weeping tears of LOVE while they washed her body and kept a prayerful vigil for her. The author suggests that what brought Dorcas back to life was not necessarily some miraculous words or touch of Peter, but the LOVE of this community of women. Their Love and tender care may have called her back from some “in-between place,” a soul that decided to stay here on earth a while longer!

I think that most of us need some sort of resurrection, some new birth or new energy right about now! I feel a bit low, Too much cabin fever, too many people we hear about that have been infected or have died. Too much time sanitizing of hands, clothing, and food from the grocery store! I don't think many of us are interested in bringing people back physically from a coma or death. However, I think most of us are interested in new life and new birth in the psychological or spiritual sense. Can we have new dreams? New hopes? New projects? This self-quarantine time we know can be fertile soil for new creativity.

Remembering the story of Dorcas, we see how the LOVE of the other widows must have been a factor, a power in her re-birth. So it is fair to ask, How does the power of God's Love work through each of us? By whose tender Love are we alive and thriving? How does Divine Love live in us as a resurrecting power? And will we share this Love to help lift up others?

I'd like to share a song I wrote some time ago, which I think is appropriate for this time. Its title is “Reach Out.” It starts with a verse on loneliness, on feeling blue, and proposes that we “Reach Out!” The second verse accepts the fact that sometimes “no one can be there,” and suggests a time for prayer, not just one kind of prayer, but

prayer that fits our own personality. We can connect with God, Jesus, or Holy Spirit in diverse ways: reading devotional writings, or doing some writing or journaling ourselves. We might pray in the quiet of early morn or late night, or we might prefer to connect with Spirit while walking, running or biking.”

The final verse admits that we can be alone for too long, and that prayer can sometimes feel empty... which leads to another chorus of “Reach Out!” Besides inner time with ourselves we all need to be in relationships of varying kinds. We all need to reach out ... and who knows, we might find an old friend free to talk or go for a walk, we might find a neighbor outside whom we haven’t met yet, or we might even reach out to a stranger! Many of you know the chorus so I hope you sing along from your homes!

*1. Are you feeling lonely, are you feeling blue?
No one there to turn to, wondering what to do...
Has your heart been wounded, are you feeling low?
Is your spirit restless, wondering where to go? (Well...)*

CHORUS:

*Reach out to an old friend, reach out for a new friend,
Reach out, for love is all around.
Reach out to a neighbor, even to a stranger,
Reach out, that’s the way love will be found!*

*2. Still there are the times no one can be there,
Maybe time to pray, to soothe your soul somewhere...
Time to take a walk, time to sing a song,
Maybe shed a tear, when you don’t feel strong (And... Chorus)*

*3. When you’ve been alone, just a bit too long,
When your prayers feel empty, and everything seems wrong,*

*Listen to the Master, prayer is more than talk;
Got to pick yourself up, got to stand and walk! (So...Chorus)*

During these quarantine, shelter-at-home times, time alone, We can develop our spiritual lives, our prayer lives. We can find new ways to relate to God, or Christ, or the Holy Spirit. (I love emphasizing the trinitarian nature of God, since it gives us so many opportunities, so many colors in the spectrum of thinking about the Divine Spirit. When seek ways to know God, Jesus Christ or Holy Spirit, we can welcome solitude times, and shift from loneliness to enjoying the opportunity to seek the Divine Spirit, the Divine Presence.

Just don't overdo alone time! Unless we are like Jesus in the wilderness or like cloistered monks, surely we need friends and relationships, like that of Tabitha and her women friends, to help us get through tough times, So it's back to "Reach Out!" And as with the aftermath of 9/11, some people get even more friendly, reach out to more neighbors, and even to strangers.

In conclusion, let's not let bad news get us down too much; let's not watch the news 10 times a day! Let's remember that as followers of Jesus, we are a people of Good News, of Gospel light and Gospel love, which has always meant a "Community of Love." And that community of love can be powerful. Such love, Jesus' kind of self-giving love, can be a resurrecting power - giving hope when depressed, giving strength when weak, giving new life when things seem dark and dismal. Let's have confidence that we follow a Savior who leads with resurrection power, a power that is experienced foremost as LOVE, IN COMMUNITY.