

Love One Another

1 John 3:16-24

The Reverend Erica Wimber Avena

April 25, 2021

Prayer: *Loving God, who reaches out to restore our souls, touch us now with your word of truth. May the familiar phrases of scripture draw us back into a vital relationship with you and all of your children....*

It's been 51 years since the first Earth Day was celebrated in the US, and now there are so many ways for everyone to participate. Whether you're interested in an education, want to take action to fight environmental racism, want to engage in a clean-up day at a park, or here at church, or are simply looking to join in prayer for our planet, there are plenty of ways to celebrate the gifts of God's good creation. Many people find their souls are restored in nature. Nature is a place of renewal, death and re-birth, shocking cruelty, and astonishing beauty.

Our scripture today is from the first letter of John, not the gospel of John, this letter is attributed to the evangelist and is part of a collection of first, second and third letters of John to the early believers. These letters were very important to the early church, St Augustine spent an entire Holy Week preaching on this letter in the year 415 in the North African city of *Hippo Regius*. They are consonant with the gospel of John in that they use the imagery of light and darkness, Jesus is the word made flesh, life, and light. It also highlights the confidence that we can have in eternal life – a word of comfort to those who suffered in the early church. Augustine said: "John speaks at length and almost the whole time about love." And he goes through the letter, line by line.

In chapter 3 of first John the writer emphasizes that the disciples are unified by love. They have experienced an early division in the church, and John throws into question whether they *ever had* learned to love each other. Their departure broke the mutual bond of love that lies at the heart of its union with God. Did they never understand? Did they get it?

I am "recycling" an old story from Jerome's Commentary on Galatians, 6:10:

We know today that there is no way of proving or disproving it, but it's been told and retold to the faithful since the year 386. Augustine knew this story. This seems to be my day to quote very old voices.

The blessed John the Evangelist lived in Ephesus until extreme old age. His disciples could barely carry him to church and he could not muster the voice to speak many words. During individual gatherings he usually said nothing, except, "Little children, love one another." The disciples and those in attendance, annoyed because they always heard the same words, finally said, "Teacher, why do you always say this?" He replied with a line worthy of John the beloved disciple of our Lord: "Because it is the Lord's commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient."¹

¹ Andrew Cain, the translator of this edition of Jerome's commentary, suggests that "the source for this story was possibly Hegesippus's Memoirs via either Clement of Alexandria or Origen." However, none of the works of Hegesippus survive, so this is speculation.

There is a lot happening in the world this week, (Earth Day, over 3 million dead worldwide from Covid19, the decision about George Floyd's death at the hands of the Milwaukee police) is it enough to say "little children, love one another"? And be done with it?

In first John, in Jerome's story about the beloved disciple, in Augustine's sermons, and in our world today, love is a verb. To love. It is a practice. And whether "little children, love one another" is sufficient, depends entirely on the particulars of how that is lived out. Its practice. Love is conveyed in the living of this verb.

Jessica Mesman shared in a *Christian Century* column this week:

"I hope to God nobody sends me any more prayers," said Susan Orfanos in a live TV interview. Her son Telemachus was killed in a mass shooting in Oakland after surviving a mass shooting in Las Vegas. "I don't want prayers," she said. "I don't want thoughts. I want gun control." And who would blame her for speaking so honestly from her grief and frustration? We've experienced so many mass shootings, so much death, and so little (effective corrective) action in response, that the hashtag #nomorethoughtsandprayers now trends on Twitter with each new event. If that's what prayer is, people don't want our prayers anymore.

She goes on to say: And yet I still believe in prayer, and I still depend on the prayer of others. I believe prayer isn't just a mental exercise, a self-help tool, another form of mindfulness or meditation, or a way to quickly dispense with my obligation to offer concrete help to those in need. Prayer inspires and sometimes demands action. That famous Frederick Douglass quote—"I prayed for twenty years but received no answer till I prayed with my legs"—reminds me to pray with my legs not just for devastating social issues of racial justice and gun violence but also for the everyday needs and griefs of my neighbors.²

First John says, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action..."

At a previous congregation I spent a lot of time over at Caleb Hitchcock Health Care Center which is the section of Duncaster retirement community in Bloomfield, for people who are sick. There, one of the oldest people I have ever known, got very interested in the racial justice work that we were doing at the church. She read books with us, viewed films, organized discussion groups. Harriett knew it was important, and at that point, the only people of color in her world she had access to were those who cared for her. She said to me in the weeks before her death, that her biggest regret, was never having gone out of her way to make a friend, a real friend, in her words -- someone she could share confidences with --who was a person of color. It was her loss. And she knew it.

At over 100 years of age, she had lived through tremendous social change in the 20th and 21st centuries, and looking back, she did it all from inside a white person's perspective. Part of white

<https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/45306/what-is-the-origin-of-the-story-that-the-apostle-john-taught-only-love-one-another>

² *Christian Century*, column: Sunday's Coming April 25
Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B

institutions, clubs, schools, neighborhoods, as part of a white family. She was right, it was a lost opportunity, to have had someone to talk it over with, from a personal point of view. A friend.

What does love look like in your life this week?

1 John connects love and prayer. Prayer, like love, has the capacity to sensitize us to what needs doing, and what perhaps, we do not need to be exhausting ourselves doing. A practice of prayer creates a pause, a space, that allows us to petition the divine, and for the divine to petition us; for God's purposes. As we take issues into prayer, forgiveness, social justice, world peace, health, the well-being of the next generations, we come out of prayer with practical next steps. Like forgiving ourselves, as God has forgiven us. Strengthening our relationship with a younger person. Listening without judgment or defensiveness to the experience of a person of color. And if world peace does not happen in our lifetimes, we can count it part of our privilege that there are a number of projects that take more than one lifetime to achieve, and it is entirely worthwhile joining and supporting those projects – supporting peace, justice, mercy, for the long haul. In the meantime, figuring out a way to live peaceably with the very annoying neighbor... or encouraging the siblings who never got along to appreciate something about each other. ... or ...if you cannot solve the whole problem of climate change, you can learn to reduce, reuse, recycle one more thing, one day at a time, – these are acts of love. Prayer with our legs. Joyful spirit-led opportunities.

Little children, love one another. John thought it would be enough...

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