

Love Matters – May 12, 24

7th Sunday of Easter

1 John 4:7-12

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Have you heard the name Julian of Norwich¹? Julian of Norwich was an English Benedictine nun in the Middle Ages. Not much is known about her life, other than that she became gravely ill at the age of thirty. She wrote that she was on the brink of death at that time. Thankfully, she was healed after having a series of visions of Christ's passion.

It is also known that in her later years, Julian became an anchoress (a hermit) at St. Julian's Church in Norwich, choosing to live in isolation from the rest of Norwich's population. When ready, she started serving as a spiritual advisor and companion within the surrounding community. Julian recorded her spiritual visions and insights gained from a lifetime of prayer. Her work, known as *Revelations of Divine Love*, is considered one of the deepest and most profound explorations of God's love in Christian literature.

Let me share part of *Revelations of Divine Love*:

God did not say "You will not have a difficult time; you will not be burdened; you will not be distressed," but God said, "You will not be overcome." God wants us to pay attention to these words so that we can always be strong in trust, in wellbeing and in woe. God loves us and delights in us, so God wants us to love God and delight in God, and trust God completely, and all shall be well."

Joy is the central theme of Julian's work, encapsulated in her often-quoted assurance, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well," reflecting the belief that God is ever-present with boundless love and

¹ Julian of Norwich: born 1342, probably Norwich, Norfolk in England. —died after 1416.

grace. Julian of Norwich especially appreciated the maternal aspects of God. She knew of motherhood from her own experience of bearing and bringing up children. The loss of her family to the plague outbreaks of the 14th century further deepened her longing for the loving, comforting, and maternal presence of God.²

The text of the hymn “Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth” (*The Faith We Sing* # 2050), which will be sung as today’s closing hymn, was penned by Jean Janzen, a poet and educator, it draws inspiration from the writings of Julian of Norwich:

1. Mothering God, you gave me birth
in the bright morning of this world.
Creator, source of every breath,
you are my rain, my wind, my sun.

2. Mothering Christ, you took my form,
offering me your food of light,
grain of life, and grape of love,
your very body for my peace.

3. Mothering Spirit, nurturing one,
in arms of patience hold me close,
so that in faith I root and grow
until I flower, until I know.

The line “Mothering God, you gave me birth in the bright morning of this world” invites us to celebrate and give thanks for God’s creative act in Genesis. Just as we see in the birthing process of humans, God took on the maternal role of creation, and this same God is still at work making things new, even at this very moment.³ As a hen gathers her brood under her wings, Mothering God continues to nurture, protect, and embrace us so that we may take root and grow until we flower in God’s reign on earth as in heaven. Don’t you feel that each and every word of the lyrics expresses God’s deep and abundant love?

We often hear that Christianity is the religion of love. However, we also see violence, oppression, and injustice which often have been done under the name of

² Richard J. Foster & James Bryan Smith, ed., *Devotional Classics*; Lawrence S. Cunningham & Keith J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality*, and more.

³ UMC Discipleship Ministries

love. Remembering our past and looking into our present, we are still in the process of “repenting” before God, fellow human beings, and God’s creature. When I took a preaching course at Harvard, the professor joked not to preach about love. She said with a smile, “Don’t preach it. Just do it.” Jesus taught us to love God, and to love one another as we love ourselves. Why is it so difficult? Why does the word “Christian love” not reach many people’s hearts? When you hear Jesus’ call to love, do you have an overwhelming feeling in your heart? Are you putting Jesus’ invitation into practice in your life? Or, does it sound too familiar and feel like a cliché to your ears?

Richard Rohr reminds us that we cannot love without God’s help. In his book *Breathing Under Water*, he implies that we do, or try to do, too many things before learning how to breathe under water. Just like the Twelve Step recovery program for Alcoholics Anonymous, we need to accept that we are powerless. Rohr said, “There is only one absolutely necessary starting point! The experience of ‘powerlessness’ is where we all must begin.”

Rohr said, “Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until they get to any real issue of ego, control, power, money, pleasure, and security. Then they tend to be pretty much like everybody else.” Without exception, we need to accept that we are all sinners. We need God and one another to breathe underwater and still to love. Then we can do what we can with joy because we are so grateful for God’s abundant love and grace.

In today’s reading, the First Letter of John, we hear the New Testament’s most profound invitation to love. John is clear that love comes from God, primarily through Jesus, who is God’s self-giving love. God’s love for us makes possible our love for one another. For all of us, 1 John provides a principle of becoming loving and compassionate Christians as God’s beloved. Here is what John says: “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another... If we love one another, God lives in us.”

You may be wondering what the United Methodist Church will look like in the future with the decisions of the recent General Conference. I plan to have more conversations with you about this sometime soon, especially through Bible study. One thing is clear: I aspire for the whole process to foster an environment of mutual listening, love, and understanding, rather than one of judgment and condemnation of our differences.

Mother Teresa once said, “What we need is to love without getting tired. How does a lamp burn? Through the continuous input of small drops of oil. What are these drops of oil in our lamps? They are the small things of daily life: faithfulness, small words of kindness, a thought for others, our ways of being silent, looking, speaking, and acting. Keep your lamp burning, and you will recognize Jesus in you [and around you].”

God calls us “beloved.”

We are God’s beloved. When you breathe in and out in God’s loving presence, sometimes you may want to try this: When you breathe in, invite compassion into yourself. When you breathe out, send compassion to others. You can expand the circle of compassion to God’s creature, but don’t forget to love and accept yourself as God’s beloved. May God hold us in God’s loving, strengthening, and caring embrace now and always. God bless you! God loves you! We are still powerless, but God heals and enables us to love. Let us love one another not because we are deserving, but because God enables us to dare to love God, others, and even ourselves. Love matters!

Let me conclude today’s sermon with Julian’s invitation: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” And all God’s beloved say, Amen!