

Proper 8A

Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18

Matthew 10:40-42

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I don't know about you, but I am sick and tired of what is happening in our nation. I can't read or hear the news or scroll through social media posts without coming away feeling sick to my stomach and emotionally drained. The amount of hate that exists is stifling, leaving me feeling like I am trying to breathe under water. The violence that has slowly crept its way into being normal leaves me feeling ill. The lack of care and concern for each other makes me sad to the point of depression sometimes. My heart hurts and breaks daily for families torn apart by violence and a system that is unjust. For children abused in the name of protecting our borders, and it is abuse, calling it anything less disregards the trauma it has caused. For the polarization that pervades our nation where the middle ground has fallen away, creating a deep chasm that separates us. For the me-myself-and-I attitude that abounds and covers everything like kudzu, choking and killing any person nearby. And I could go on.

What does all of this have to do the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? I may not be able to see your reactions, but I know that this question is bouncing around someone's head at this moment. What does all of this have to do with the Gospel? Everything.

In our Baptismal covenant with Jesus, we promise, with God's help, to do the following:

We promise to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

We promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

We promise to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

The Good News, the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, is exquisitely simple- agape love. Love of God. Love of your neighbor. Love of yourself. Love of one another as Jesus loves you. Love that is self-sacrificing by seek and serving Christ in all persons. Love that is liberating by striving for justice and peace among all people. Love that is life-giving by respecting the dignity of every human being. Love. That's it- everything else is commentary.

One of my favorite Jesus memes and its variations has a picture of Jesus surrounded by people. Jesus says to the people, "Love one another". The people ask, "But what if they're immigrants? Or gay? Or Poor?". Jesus replies, "Did I stutter?"

The need for explanatory notes is what bogs us down. Throughout the four canonical books of the Gospel, we hear people asking Jesus to clarify His message of love by asking "what if", "who", "what shall we do", or "is it lawful". That hasn't changed in over two thousand years. People ask these questions because, while Jesus' message of love is simple, it is often hard to do.

So, we try to wiggle out of it, to find a loophole where we don't actually have to have the love of Jesus for someone who offends us, or says stupid things, or doesn't fit our preconceived notions of what makes someone worthy of love.

As followers of Christ we are called to live a life of agape love for all of God's children regardless of whatever descriptors we use for them. When we are baptized, we make a promise to walk the way of love, so that God's kingdom can flourish here on Earth. Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry often references the African-American spiritual hymn "There is a Balm in Gilead"¹ when proclaiming the Gospel message. In this spiritual we sing of God's faithfulness and love for the world:

There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole,
there is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.

There is a balm in Gilead and that balm is Jesus Christ. It is His love that soothes our troubled hearts, minds, and souls. It is His love that shows us the way to live with another. It is His love that gives us the courage and strength to stand up for justice and to fight for peace in the world.

Jesus told his first disciples what love is. He showed them what love in the Kingdom of God looks like. Then He sent His first disciples out into the world to heal, to cure, to be a balm to a broken and hurting world. As he sent those first disciples, so too, he sends us. We are called to do our best to build God's kingdom by sowing seeds of love, by denouncing injustice, and by standing up against hate and violence.

This is hard work. There are times, that because of our human frailty, we will fail. There are times when we wonder why we speak up for justice and peace only to have our words fall on deaf ears. There are times when we just want to crawl into bed and ignore the human suffering that abounds in our world, because no matter what we do, it never seems to be enough. As the first verse in the spiritual hymn says:

Sometimes I feel discouraged
and think my work's in vain,
but then the Holy Spirit
revives my soul again.

The Holy Spirit is always in our corner. She reminds us to breathe and lifts our sagging spirits, giving us the energy to go on. The Holy Spirit cheers us on. She whispers in our ears, "You've got this. You are God's child. You are good enough just as you are."

The final verse of the spiritual speaks to us about our perceived personal shortcomings in spreading Christ's Gospel of love to the world.

If you cannot preach like Peter,
if you cannot pray like Paul,

you can tell the love of Jesus
and say, "He died for all."

To be a balm to the world, we don't have to be Peter or Paul, we simply have to let our words and actions speak the language of agape love. Acts of agape love are most commonly simple actions, such as giving a cup of cold water to someone who is thirsty, making sandwiches for Laundry Love, writing a letter calling for prison or immigration reform, or wearing a mask when you leave your home. Actions so simple, that we often fail to recognize them for what they are—acts of self-sacrificing, liberating, and life-giving love. But it is these small acts of agape love that tell the love of Jesus. It is these small acts of agape love that are a balm to someone who is broken and hurting. These small acts of agape love will change the world and build the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

Amen

1. In the Old Testament, Gilead was the name of the mountainous region east of the Jordan River. This region was known for having skillful physicians and an ointment made from the gum of a tree particular to that area. Many believed that this balm had miraculous powers to heal the body. In the book of Jeremiah, God tells the people of Israel that though many believe in the mysterious healing power of this balm, they can't trust in those powers for spiritual healing or as a relief of their oppression. He reminds them that He is ultimately in control, and only He can relieve their suffering. In the New Testament, God answers the suffering of His people by sending His own son to take our place. Jesus becomes our "balm in Gilead." It is Him we are called to turn to in our times of trial for healing and comfort. We sing this song with that assurance: no matter our hardships or supposed shortcomings, Jesus loves us enough to take our suffering upon Himself.

Bulletin blurb at https://hymnary.org/text/sometimes_i_feel_discouraged_spiritual