**Marcia Harrington**

**Let Us See What Love Can Do**

**12/19/2021**

**Text: Luke 1:39-55**

**The Zoom recording for this teaching is available** [**here**](https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/NmSUrsTLNdB64Bzh5mpYrLq-v2ZDMVDBNWjXdgHRrEZV0RkKfxxQVFr8WPKhPhvR.PUQ2DRd9dCImGMLm?startTime=1639927373000)**.**

**I want to begin by offering my gratitude, and I hope the community’s, to Bill Mefford, Crisely Melecio-Zambrano and Sito Sasieta for the depth of their teachings on the themes of Hope, Peace, and Joy. Hope, peace, joy are persistent qualities of love. They dwell as do other qualities in the orbit of Love.**

**It is the 4th Sunday in Advent, and we end Advent with the theme of love, a foundational core of Judaic and Christian spirituality. I want to begin with a song that I shared at the Camp Meeting in October. It’s a song, written originally as an alternative birthday song, but it is also a song that raises four deep life questions. The words are:**

***Why* have *you* come to earth?**

**Do you *remember*?**

***Why* have you taken birth?**

***Why* have you come?**

**To love, serve and remember,**

**To love, serve and remember,**

**To love.**

 **Katie, the Potter at Holden Village**

**Play the song.**

**Why are you, why am I on earth? Why has each of us been birthed? The three responses — to love, serve and remember — point us to actions that undergird and provide a scaffold for our lives: 1) to learn what love looks like and what love requires; 2) to discern how, individually and communally as followers of Jesus, we are to serve with love using our sacred gifts; and 3) to remember that as individuals and communities of faith we are never left with just our own present resources. The Brazilian theologian Rubem Alves reminds us that “in the Biblical world one hopes for the future because one has already seen the creative event taking place in the past.” That points us to remembering our history and our sacred story.**

**This week, both the Psalms and the Gospel include the Magnificat. It focuses on one of the creative past events that we continue to remember. This hymn is embedded in the story of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, but the story begins simply in an earlier episode set in the time of Herod’s reign over Judea. An elderly couple, Elizabeth and her husband Zachariah, have reached old age without having children. The failure to conceive was held as a failure of women and often interpreted as God’s judgment against the woman. That judgment also brought suffering and shame on the woman’s husband. The husband in this case is Zachariah, and Luke characterizes Zachariah and Elizabeth as exemplary characters. In this episode, Zachariah is serving his term as a priest in the temple (Lk 1:8-10) in Jerusalem. The angel Gabriel appears to him and announces that in response to his and Elizabeth’s prayers, he and Elizabeth will bear a son, and that son will “make ready the people for the Lord”. (Lk 1:17) Unfortunately, Zacharia is skeptical and does not trust the angel’s message so he is muted until the baby is born and named John.**

**Next, the story shifts to Mary, a young, unmarried woman engaged to a man named Joseph and living in the remote village of Nazareth in Galilee. Gabriel also informs her that she has found favor with the Lord and will bear a son and name him Jesus. He will be called “The Son of the Most High” and will reign over the house of Jacob (that is Israel) forever”. (Lk 1: 33) Additionally, Gabriel shares that her older relative Elizabeth, long barren, has conceived a son. That is stunning news!**

**Soon thereafter, Mary heads to Elizabeth’s home in the hill country. The stories of John and Jesus now come together in a tender scene. We are given no reason for Mary’s trip. Was it out of joy? A need for counsel with a wiser elder? We can imagine but we don’t know. Luke’s focus now shifts to Mary, her body and the impending birth. As Mary greets Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth’s body leaps, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. She then blesses Mary as the future mother of the Lord. Mary then responds, beginning with the words,**

**“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked**

**with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” (Lk 1:46-48). Here we have two women, Elizabeth and Mary, matched in their songs of praise.**

**Two words in the Magnificat have always engaged me. The first word is *magnifies*, the second *remembrance*.**

**I have long thought the word *magnifies* here is a challenge. I wonder, “How am I magnifying the Lord, magnifying Love if at all? How am I going deeper into my own sight, seeing more clearly God’s expectations? And, how are we doing as humans, earthly creatures, doing with the magnification of Love — with enlarging or bringing Love closer into our individual and communal lives.**

**So, I started thinking about Jesus and his coming birth. *About where Jesus was coming from, who he was. About what he understood and remembered. About what he taught and how his life manifested the magnification of God’s love.***

**And, the second word *remembrance* engaged me because it invites gratitude for the gift of memory and it connects us to past personal and communal experiences and to the people and creatures we have loved and been loved by. In addition, our memory is critical to learning, and if necessary, unlearning.**

**I trust that Jesus as a child absorbed and learned much about his faith tradition, its culture and its community. For sure he learned that his soul, his essence, mind, body and spirit, was anchored in what we commonly call the great commandment. It was Jesus’ inner ground. In Judaism, this commandment is the Shema. It** **is the heart of the Jewish law, a core piece of liturgy which names God as the source of all life, created and connected. The last word in Hebrew in the Shema, “*echad*” means one.**

 **So, we are called to remember from Deuteronomy and Leviticus:**

**Dt. 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might.**

**Lev. 19:18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.**

**So, we remember that God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.**

**Jesus was a Jew, honoring a call to reform, to form again his people, in living out their covenant with God. That meant living out the great commandment in a more expansive way in the face of profound stress and imperial oppression. Now earlier this year, Mark Charles shared with us that Jesus’ primary call was to the Jews as a people. That is true, but, the gospels, written 40 to 70 years after Jesus’ death, hold stories that show Jesus pushing the boundaries of exclusion: from the love of God, from the love of neighbors and others, and from the love of self. Perhaps, this is an example of unlearning, of openness to change.**

**The late author and columnist, Rachel Held-Evans shares that “With Scripture, we have been confronted with some of the most powerful stories ever told. How we harness that power, whether for good or evil, oppression or liberation, changes everything.” (*Inspired: Staying Giants, Walking and Loving the Bible Again*. Rachel Held, p. 57)**

**We should not forget that Jesus was a devout Jew, a teacher and prophet always living out how to understand and live into the great commandment to love. And, this included love of enemies (Luke 6:27-35). “But, I say to you [who] listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” In the preface to our liturgy today, Henri Nouwen drew attention to loving enemies by praying for them. We remember William Ashley who prayed consistently for Donald Trump.**

**Because we are journeying through the gospel of Luke this liturgical year, I skimmed through Luke for stories that spoke directly to the great commandment to love. And I looked for magnification of love through concrete action and for a connection to remembrance.**

**It is right there in Luke 10, the story of the Good Samaritan. This is not a story that deals primarily with goodness though the Samaritan seems a good person. A more accurate title would be**

 ***The Samaritan Traveler* because each of us, like the Samaritan, travels throughout our lives, sometimes on dangerous ground, physically as well as internally. We move through life and find ourselves in an arc of *encounter, of embracing and of embarking or leaving*\* as did the Samaritan.**

**The lead-up to this story in Luke is as follows:**

* **Jesus is on his journey to Jerusalem, to his ultimate death, and along the way is sharing some tough teachings for daily life.**
* **Out of the crowd, a lawyer, likely a Pharisee, stands up to test him, saying, “What must *I* do to inherit eternal life?**
* **Jesus, the experienced teacher punts the question back to him. What do you *remember*, “what is written in the law? What do you read there?**
* **The lawyer responds by reciting the Shema, the great commandment: Love God, love neighbor as yourself.**
* **Jesus affirms the lawyer’s answer, but then the lawyer, seemingly set off base, rallies, posing a question that is *painfully relevant and controversial even today:* “and, who is my neighbor?” It is important to know that 1st century Judaism was ordered by boundaries, rules and regulations related to various kinds of relationships: social positions, power, and privilege. These boundaries defined the limits of who is the neighbor.**

**Then comes the powerful and explicit story that Jesus tells to re-define and expand love of neighbor, love of others. It is a rich and complex story requiring context. I’ve been pondering it for many months due to a “war” against neighbors, so to speak, on our condo property.**

**The familiar biblical story starts with two encounters: one, a*n assault* and the second, a**

***rescue*.**

***The assault*: a certain, *undefined*, man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho on a notoriously dangerous road. (In the 5th century, it was called the Red or Bloody Way.) The road descended nearly 3300 feet in 17 miles. Narrow passages provided places for bandits to hide and then attack. The man encounters bandits who strip him of all possessions, beat him and leave him half-dead. He is desperately in need of help.**

**Two passers-by, one a priest and the other a Levite, see the body, move to the other side of the road, and walk on. The priest and Levite would have been personally respected members of society. They are associated with the temple, but they are bound by exclusionary rules and bound to ethnic and historical boundaries due to many years of animosities between Jews and Samaritans.**

***The rescue:* the 3rd passer-by is a Samaritan. He is likely a merchant or trader. Now the Samaritan has at least two strikes against him: 1) he is a Samaritan traveling in hostile territory; 2) he is a trader or merchant, one who would be itinerant, seen as non-observant of the laws and as dishonest. He sees/encounters the wounded body, he embraces the wounded one by going to him, he pours oil and wine over his wounds, he bandages his wounds, puts him on his donkey, and takes him to an inn. The inn was not a place where one would go if that one had relatives in the area. The Samaritan then takes care of him overnight. The next day he embarks, giving the innkeeper money for at least about two days of care. Next, he promises that, on his return journey, he will repay the innkeeper for additional expenses.**

**Encounter, embrace, embark. Here in this story is the magnification of love of neighbors, of others. Jesus’ parable is not about giving us a model for morality. It is about a mirror for identity with the question Jesus poses: Which of the three passers-by was the neighbor? The lawyer must answer and does: the one who showed mercy. *“Go and do likewise,”* says Jesus.**

**Action matters. But the Samaritan also saw the wounded one in the ditch as someone to love, as a human being, a creature deserving of love.**

**It is our charge as humans and faith communities to live out this vision. Both John and Jesus called their faith community back to the grounding commandment to love God, neighbors & others, oneself and Creation. And this is a humbling and hard journey. If God is one, if Love is one, then we are called to love it all.**

**But, right now for me the journey to love a neighbor living close to us is at the forefront, up close. She, a relatively new neighbor whom we call “the woman with the stick,” has gone to “war” against numerous residents, an old feral cat, our dog, the condo association as well as her soon-to-be ex-husband. The impact has been severe: abusive language, lies, countless calls to the police, to Animal Services and visits from such, multiple litigations. Over the past year, there have been hearings in District and Circuit Court, judgments, peace orders, and thousands of dollars spent in lawyers’ fees. Even the County Fire Marshal and the County Office of Human Rights have been drawn into the war game. The command to love one’s enemies is resting on my heart and soul. I do not see this perpetrator as my enemy, but she sees other residents, the board, the cat and the dog as her enemies. We know she is wounded and living with a disabling mental illness. The most loving things Mike and I can do is pray for her healing, try to do her no harm, and with our neighbors take needed protective and legal actions. This has taken a commitment to courage and persistence. Both can be qualities of love.**

**I want to briefly return to the Magnificat, lest you think I have ignored the middle section, the words of reversal that speak beyond just praise but to what happens when God’s strength manifests: the proud get scattered, the powerful are brought down from their thrones, the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are filled with good things, the rich get sent away empty. And God helps by remembering his mercy and promises to the faith ancestors and the descendants. One of those descendants was Jesus; we, too, are descendants. We must commit to remembering the identifying actions and qualities of God, of Love. They are there in our scriptures, in the teachings and life of Jesus, in Paul’s love letters to communities he founded, and in the lives of countless witnesses. Like the Samaritan Traveler, we must remain aware, courageous and compassionate and as Micah reminds us “to do justice, to love kindness, and “to walk humbly with God”. That is the thread with which the poet William Stafford, told us “to not let go of” in his poem *The Way It Is*:**

**There is a thread that you follow. It goes among/things that change. But it doesn’t change./People wonder about what you are pursuing./You have to explain about the thread./But it is hard for others to see./While you hold it you can’t get lost./Tragedies happen; people get hurt/or die: and you suffer and get old./Nothing you do can stop time’s unfolding./You don’t ever let go of the thread.**

**I end with a chant; its words are a call to love and based on a quote from William Penn, a Quaker convert and a founder of the colonial colony of Pennsylvania. Let us see what Love can do. (Play *Let Us See What Love Can Do* by the Morningstar Singers.)**

**Resources:**

**Bruce Birch, What Does the Lord Require: The Old Testament Call to Social Witness**

**Holden Village for the 2021 summer session theme, The Samaritan Traveler: Encounter, Embrace, Embark**

**Culpepper, R.Alan, New Interpreters Bible, Volume IX: Luke**

**Ringe, Sharon: Luke, Westminster Bible Companion**

**Stafford, William: *The Way It Is* in Leading from Within: Poetry That Sustains the Courage to Lead**