The Will To Dream – week 4 – Merciful Love

Our theme for Advent is The Will to Dream and today our focus is Merciful Love. (PAUSE) We throw the word "love" around lightly don't we? We say, "I love chocolate, or I love sports or Hallmark Christmas movies." Although there is certainly nothing wrong with enjoying any of these things, I think we can all agree that God calls us to a much deeper and broader lifestyle of love.

Love is a common theme in Scripture. I think it is significant that the list of the fruit of the spirit in Galatians begins with Love, don't you? It is the foundation on which all of the other fruits rest. First Corinthians tells us that faith hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is what? Love. We could embody every other quality on the list, but if we embody them without love, Paul tells us, we are nothing – we are like a clanging symbol or a jarring gong.

Most of us enact love all of the time – it is a great joy to me to see how this family of faith cares for each

other so deeply and consistently. Most of the time it's easy and even a joy for us to do that. But sometimes we find ourselves in a position where offering love, especially merciful is not be so easy – where it may cost us something. (PAUSE)

So it was with Zechariah in today's New Testament lesson. Several months have passed since Mary's visit to Elizabeth – the story we talked about last week –and Elizabeth and Zechariah's long awaited son has just been born. As was the Jewish custom, the baby is brought to the temple for his circumcision and naming ceremony. Everyone assumes that the baby will be named Zechariah after his father. But following the instructions from the angel of the Lord, Elizabeth says, "No, his name will be John." Apparently not willing to trust Elizabeth, the temple attendants turn to Zechariah – who is still mute. Using a tablet, he confirms his wife's words, "His name is John." Immediately Zechariah regains his speech and, begins to praise God. Elizabeth and Mary had their joyful moment when they met, now, finally, Zechariah gets his turn.

He is filled with the Spirit and he speaks what is known as the Benedictus, the prophetic words we heard just a moment ago. And make no mistake about it, Zechariah's words are not soft or sappy sentiment, they are words of covenantal courage. He moves from speechlessness to song, from doubt to prophetic imagination. In his song, Zechariah reminds us that love is the care and connection that binds us together with each other and with God. God's love liberates us, not just comforts us, it remembers, not just reacts. Yes, the Benedictus is a proud father's prayer, but it is more than that, it is a political and theological declaration that God's love is strong, saving, and rooted in the memory that just as God has acted before, God **will** act again - with merciful love to humanity.

But here is the costly part – Zechariah stands up to both the empire and the spiritual leaders with his words. He writes and speaks amid the Roman empire's oppressive and terrorizing regime. He challenges the Empire by declaring that the Savior has come. The ensuing birth of Jesus is so threatening to Herod that he

orders his soldiers to go house to house, breaking down doors, and wrenching babies from their mother's arms. Joseph and Mary are warned to take Jesus and flee to Egypt as refugees to protect their young son. Zechariah challenges the political status quo.

He also challenges the spiritual leaders by naming what is wrong – spiritual elitism and disbelief, and he stands against both temple and state by speaking out against systems that silence. His song sings a new truth – love liberates. It remembers, it forgives, and it sets us free to serve God without fear. Hear his words again: By the tender mercies of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Today we lament that love has been misused, weaponized and withheld. But that is all the more reason for us to keep living out merciful love by blessing one another, by speaking up where we've been silent, and preparing the way of the Lord with love that is bold, faithful and free.[i] We can add our voices to today's

psalmist, “I will ding of your steadfast love O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.”

Friends, make no mistake about it, this is challenging work for all of us. Years after Zechariah writes, Jesus will have some very frank words about how we are to offer merciful love. In his Sermon on the Mount he proclaimed, "You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. For God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same? "

(PAUSE)

Ouch. Is God stepping on anyone else’s toes besides mine this morning? (PAUSE) So let’s get real about this, who in your family or your neighborhood or your workplace or even here at church are you struggling to truly love as a fellow child of God? Perhaps it is

someone who has deeply hurt or offended you – and you are struggling just to forgive them, much less love them. In a broader sense, who is it harder for you to love and pray for right now, our new governor and her administration or our president and his followers? If I'm honest, like many of you, I struggle to love some of the people making the news in these challenging days.

Although hate is the obvious opposite of love, there are other more subtle opposites that challenge us in these difficult days. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said the opposite of love is not hate but indifference or apathy, and, in many ways, I agree with him. It is all too easy to stop caring and loving these days isn't it, to get overwhelmed and think we can't make a difference?

Others believe that the opposite of love is fear, and there is truth in the premise too – for fear is often what fuels our prejudice and our distrust of one another. So what are you finding yourself afraid of or indifferent to? As we mentioned last week, too often these days we are being encouraged to be suspicious of and antagonistic towards those who are different from us.

Whether we identify the opposite of love as hate, indifference or fear, they all keep us from enacting merciful love. As we talked about last week, our first step is remembering that everyone is made in the image of God. Mary Lou Kownacki is a Benedictine nun and long-time peacemaker. She invests her life is the inner city of Erie, Pennsylvania, surrounded by poor families trying to survive and keep hope alive amidst drugs, violence, and despair, and that was all pre-COVID days. She says, "There isn't anyone you can't love once you've heard their story." What if we took time to stop and really listen to those we struggle to love? What if we put ourselves in their shoes? What if we began to pray for them regularly as Jesus commands us to? Now let me be clear, loving someone as ourselves, and as God would have us love them, does not mean that we become doormats or enablers of unhealthy behaviors. Sometimes godly love is tough love.

And if we're honest, sometimes it's hard to see the image of God in others, isn't it? We continue to see horrific acts of hate and violence all around us. Just this week we

mourn with the Brown University community, the Jewish community who gathered on Bondi Beach last weekend, and with the family and friends of Rob Reiner and his wife. We also mourn with families right here in Richmond who lost loved ones to gun violence this week.

But as Mr. Rogers so beautifully reminded us, in times of tragedy, look for the helpers. This week, many in Australia were grateful for shop owner Ahmed al Ahmed, who disarmed one of the gunmen on the beach. The Prime Minister of Australia, Anthony Albanese had this to say about his actions: "At a moment where we have seen evil perpetrated, he shines out as an example of the strength of humanity. We are a brave country. Ahmed al Ahmed represents the best of our country." Al Ahmed, who was shot multiple times in the arm by the 2nd gunman faces multiple surgeries and long recovery. To date, over 40,000 people have donated over 1.5 million dollars to him and his family. That's merciful love.

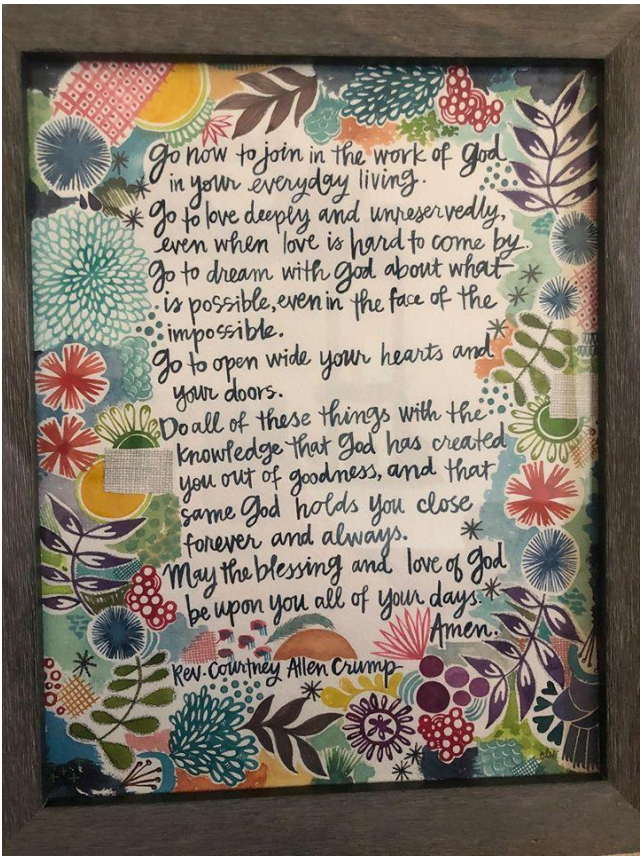
And the hard truth is that sometimes, perhaps even often, we are called to offer merciful love long before we feel love at an emotional level. You may remember that

the day after the Nickel Mines school shooting, leaders of the Amish community visited the shooter's widow, offering forgiveness for the horrific acts of violence her husband had inflicted on their loved ones. Friends, that was tender, merciful, love.

As important as these examples of merciful love are for all of us to remember and emulate, we must also stay focused on working to reform the systemic issues all around us. Cornell West put it this way: Justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love looks like in private.

(Hold up flag) For many month this flag hung in front of our home. At the bottom it said, "Love wins." When it got this bedraggled, I finally took it down, and prepared to throw it away. But as I look at it, I decided to keep it, because it's an apt description of the word today. Our acts of love gets battered, don't they. But the message prevails. Love wins. Paul put it this way in I Corinthians: love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends. That has given me great hope and comfort this week as

we continue to navigate this crazy world. Love bears all things, hope all things, and endures all things, love never ends. How do we embody that kind of love? Mother Theresa put it quite simply, "The highest form of worship is to find the least among you and treat them like Jesus." May it be so for each of us and all of us. And all God's people said, "Amen."



[ii] Theological Summary – "The Will to Dream – Advent Four," p 31-33