

Hammering Out Love

I John 4:7-21

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, (May 5) 2023

Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance)

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When I was a boy, one of my mother's favorite record albums that she would play on the stereo while cooking or cleaning, was Peter, Paul, and Mary's *If I Had a Hammer*. I still listen to it often on my porch. The first stanza says, "I'd hammer out danger/ I'd hammer out warning/ I'd hammer out love between my brothers and my sisters/ All over this land."

Our reading from I John is about love being hammered out. It was written to a small community in Christ that is broken and divided and hurting. The distinguished Johannine scholar, Raymond Brown, suggests that this broken church had some members who had left while the rest were hurting but nevertheless hanging in there – abiding – with one another. This writer (or perhaps writers) is not writing a letter from some far-off place telling this small broken church how to love one another. Rather, the perspective is from inside the hurt and inside the congregation. The author is saying, "We must work this love out. It does not simply drop upon us full blown, and it is not an abstract emotion that makes us walk around feeling oozy with one another. No, love is something we learn to do and practice. It must be hammered out together. We have the work of love to do."

And this love, the author says, is clearly defined. When we look up love in the New Testament, the first definition and the definition that determines all others, is God is love. Specifically, the God we know in Jesus Christ is love. It's not that

love exists, and Jesus Christ is one of the variations who expresses an already existing love. For the New Testament, and for the church, the God we know in Jesus is love. All love proceeds from this God we know in Jesus. And we see this love in two interconnected ways: First, God in Christ is with us. It is central to who God is, what God wants, what God does, what God will do, and what we're called to be and do. God loves us and is with us in that love.

That's why one of the most important verses in the Bible is John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and lived with us."

Secondly, completely and totally connected to God being with us in Jesus, is Jesus on the cross. The love of God in Christ is always self-giving love, even suffering for us and alongside of us. On the cross Christ's outstretched arms receives all. He receives and absorbs the very worst violence and hatred we and the Powers of Death and Destruction can give. But he also receives all who suffer and hurt, all who are broken and defeated, all who have given up hope.

The theologian Jurgen Moltmann combined the notions of God in Christ with us and God in Christ on the cross by saying the cross is God in solidarity with us. Moltmann wrote that the suffering on the cross is not just Christ's suffering, they are "the sufferings of the poor and weak, which Jesus shares in his own body and in his own soul in solidarity with them" (Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, p. 130).

Theologian James Cone says, "The cross ... is not good news for the powerful, for those who are comfortable with the way things are, or for anyone whose understanding of religion is aligned with power. The religious authorities of Jesus' time were threatened by his teachings about the reign of God's justice and love, and the state authorities executed him as ... 'one who perverts the nation' and

‘stirs up the people’ (Luke 23:2, 5).” Cone goes on to say that our salvation is to be found in solidarity with those who suffer (see Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p. 156, 160).

Bonhoeffer put it this way, “The Bible directs us to God’s powerlessness and suffering. Only a suffering God can help” (cited in Cone, p. 157).

The writer of I John seeks to remind his or her fellow church members that the knowing and loving God is connected to knowing and loving one another. The solidarity of Christ with us is tied to the solidarity with all who suffer and are broken.

Today is Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) in Judaism. The day when Jews and those in solidarity with them, remember and lament the genocide of the Jewish people by the Nazis.

Yesterday was the 54th anniversary of the National Guard shootings at Kent State University where 4 students were killed and another nine were wounded, one of whom remains paralyzed to this day, and also where our own Mary Cooper was a student in class, and Andy and Linda Parr were also students.

Stuart Beal, the son of Heather and Brent Beal, is a student at Columbia University and was arrested there ten days ago for participating in the student non-violent protests against the killing of the Palestinian people of Gaza by the Israeli military and incredibly violent and ruthless policies of the Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu.

Sisters Jane and Kate are both students at the University of North Carolina and are the daughters of close friends of ours. They have been in a supportive role in the protests at the Chapel Hill campus and have been giving reports of what's happening there – much like what is happening with student protests all over this country against Israel's massive killing of Palestinians in Gaza. And their reports include misleading statements in the news media by school administrators and police officials about the protests.

On this Lord's Day, as we prepare to gather around the Lord's Table, the Altar where we participate anew in the suffering death of Jesus in solidarity with all who suffer, what do we say? What do we say with and to these students who are fed up and shouting that the killing must stop? What do we say as we remember the students killed by the National Guard at Kent State? And what do we say on this Yom HaShoah? What do we say of the incredibly tragic irony of a people who had genocide committed against them, that their government seems to be committing genocide of another people?

Let me tell you what I say ... [Holding up a long strip of cloth] This strip of cloth is a stole, a clerical stole, which was put around my neck 39 years ago this month by Vincent Harding – black church historian, civil rights activist, and speechwriter for Martin Luther King.

I had this stole put around my neck as I knelt and prayed and heard for the first time from Vincent Harding the same benediction that you hear every Sunday, and I then walked with other young clergy to nonviolently block the entrance to the State Department in Washington DC, protesting the killing of innocent civilians in Nicaragua and Central America by U.S. sponsored "Contras". Thirty-nine years ago, this stole symbolized my solidarity with the suffering people of Nicaragua.

This morning, all these years later, I put this stole on in solidarity with all those who suffer – the Palestinian people, the innocent Israelis who were attacked and killed and taken hostage by Hamas. In solidarity with our students who are speaking up and doing the right thing, and many of them like Stuart will pay a price.

I put this stole on and prepare to gather with you around the Lord's Table where the Living Christ is with us and suffers alongside all who suffer – from Israel and Gaza to here in Nacogdoches, from famine and genocide to abuse and poverty and injustice. Christ is with us, is broken with us in our brokenness – broken homes and broken marriages, broken relationships, broken society, and on and on.

This same Jesus who was broken is the same Jesus who was resurrected, so in this meal we participate with him in hope, love and justice, in peace and reconciliation, in freedom and healing.

So do not give up in despair and exhaustion! Come and be fed nourishing hope. Come! Let's join with the Living Christ – because we've got a hammer, and we've got a bell. And we got a song to sing all over this land. "It's the hammer of justice, it's the bell of freedom, it's the song about love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.