

## CHANGING THE WORLD THROUGH LOVE

Luke 1: 26-38; 1 John 4: 7-9, 11-21

She came to church with six girls. I had never seen her before. The girls ranged in age from younger to teens. Was she a single mom? After church she introduced herself to me. Her name was Rhonda, and she was a foster mom. She was looking for a church and a community that would welcome her and her girls, a church and a community that would treat them like any other family. Over the next several weeks some of the girls joined the church school during worship. One or two of the teens started attending the youth program. Everything seemed to be going well.

But then, one Sunday, Rhonda came to me and asked if we could talk more privately. She said she wanted to come to see me some time during the week. She had some thoughts about my sermons, but also, she wanted to tell me a little more about herself because she wanted to make sure we understood each other fully before she made a greater commitment. "Absolutely," I said. "Let's meet."

And so we did. Our meeting was one of several we would have. The first thing on Rhonda's agenda was to make sure I appreciated where these girls were coming from and what they'd already been through in their lives. They were victims of neglect and abuse by parents and parental figures who were lost and broken. Some of the girls had serious mental health challenges and were on medication. Some struggled with addictions and with emotional volatility and fragility. Over time, some of the girls were beginning to share some of their stories. Repeated disappointments with parents, neglect and abuse were all part of the sharing, with prayers and tears also shared. Rhonda was totally committed to loving these girls through their difficult journeys. Would we as a church community be prepared to do the same? It wouldn't be easy, but she could not risk allowing any more disappointments for her girls than they had already lived in their young lives.

I told Rhonda we would. But I also told her that we had to learn what that meant. We needed to commit to a partnership of support and learning. Over the next months and year everything seemed to be going well. But after church, one Sunday, Rhonda wanted to speak to me rather urgently. Two sisters living with her were in crisis with their parents. There had been

repeated abuse. If she really wanted to go all the way with them, she was going to petition the province to legally adopt them. She would be their mom. The sisters were desperate for this to happen. Their parents were a destructive presence in their lives, and they needed to be free of them. They needed a real parent. The question was: how would the congregation accept this? Would we be open to having a ceremony in church where we would bless this new configuration of family?

I did some research. We put together a little ceremony. We got some special bracelets made that would symbolize this new union of daughters and mother. Even as this family had come together out of so much brokenness and hurt, they would be a family like any other family in the congregation. It was a beautiful event, like a wedding celebration. There was food and music, tears and laughter and much thanksgiving to God for the power of love to overcome so much pain, suffering and injustice in our world.

OK, so why am I telling you this story? It's beautiful and all, but what does this have to do with Mary and her child to be born? It has everything to do with it. Mary's world was a world very different than ours here in Canada. Once Mary became a young teenager, her family had to look for a man for her to marry. They would be engaged, but she would remain a virgin till they officially married. Anything else would bring shame and dishonour not only to Mary but to her whole family. There was no wiggle room.

So here we are with this so-called visitation by an angel. Mary is pregnant. How did it happen? The most obvious cause is sex. Was it with Joseph or someone else? Whatever the case may be, shame and dishonour are in store. But there is also this visitation by an angel. Was anyone else there to witness it and to speak up on behalf of Mary? No. It was Mary herself who received the angelic visitation. The angel spoke into her heart and soul. Mary was opened up to love. No matter the circumstances of this child's birth, he was a special child, a one-of-a-kind child, a child that would change the world.

Unless Mary believed this vision and lived into it, unless Mary was fired up heart and soul with love for this child yet to be born, what would have happened? Shame and dishonour would have buried her and there would be no gospel story to tell. In Luke's account of the divine conception, Mary is the key actor. In Matthew's account, it is Joseph. Both Mary and Joseph have to engage in partnership with the divine, to love this child conceived out of wedlock, and to believe extraordinary possibilities for the child to be raised

and protected under their care. He was a child of the Holy Spirit as much as he was their child.

One more thing. Mary has an ally in her aunt Elizabeth. In the opening chapter of the gospel, we're told that Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah have been childless for too long. Now they are past the typical child-bearing years. But then, Elizabeth gets pregnant. It's a miracle. Elizabeth is to be the mother of John the Baptist. Mary hasn't seen Elizabeth in a long time. All she knows is that her aunt has been unable to get pregnant. The angel tells Mary that this is no longer the case. Elizabeth is with child as well. This raises the possibility of the miraculous. "For nothing will be impossible with God" Mary is told. If Elizabeth can get pregnant in her old age, you can believe this child conceived in you is not only a miracle of God, dear Mary, this child will change the world! He will be a king, like David of old, but his kingdom will not be established by the power of military, political or economic strength. No. The kingdom of this child in you will be established by the power of love. And love begins with you and your love for this child.

OK, preacher, so where do you get that in this story? I get that because we're told the Holy Spirit is involved. The Holy Spirit is the movement of God, the activity of God, the flow and energy of God. God is not just some imaginary figure in some faraway place called 'heaven.' God is a relation, an energy, a flow. When love is shared between people, God is that love. When people are transformed because they are loved, God is in that transformation. When there is hope for the world, beginning with hope in a new configuration of family, God is in that hope. God is the energy, the flow, the movement, the relation that is love. We take that so seriously in church that we worship such love, we name it God and we pray to God and hold all kinds of rituals and discussion groups to create space in us for that energy and flow to move in and through us, transforming us again and again as we have to live our lives with all their ups and downs...

And this, I believe, is totally what our second reading from the first letter of John is all about. We not only read that God is identified as love; we also read this: "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us and God's love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in God and God abides in us, because God has given us God's Spirit." The Holy Spirit is God's Spirit and God's Spirit is love in all its transforming energy and flow.

OK, and two more things in this passage. First, our oneness with the Love we name God is dependent on our openness and commitment to love real people in the world around us. We cannot love God whom we cannot see, we're told, if we hate a fellow human whom we can see. Wow! That's a lot of pressure. But it also makes it real. It gives us a real challenge to work on. How do we find creative ways to love and care for others, even others who are responsible for injustice and harm to us and those we care about? Justice and accountability cannot be compromised if we care. But there is no place for hate, retaliation and desire to hurt that arises from hate.

Finally, we're also told this: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." To love someone I cannot be afraid of them. To feel loved I have to trust the love, not be afraid I will be punished for any failure or imperfection. We can only become better if we are loved. We can only create opportunities for transformation in others if we have love for them. Mary and Joseph must love this child, conceived out of wedlock with all that this will mean for them. Will they be punished by their family and their community for breaking the rules? Will shame and dishonour follow them and their child because all kinds of things will be said about him and them? It will take a lot of love to be free of all that. It will take nothing less than the Holy Spirit to fill this child with the destiny in him. God is in the energy, the flow, the Spirit, the relation that is real love...

And this, my friends, brings it back to my opening story. A year ago this summer, I was contacted by Rhonda's adopted daughters. Rhonda had died. I hadn't realized that growing up with experiences of abuse herself, Rhonda had some of her own addiction issues that, in the end, contributed to her poor health and eventual death. But her daughters were so thankful for her. One of them was happily married with children of her own. The other was living her life, still struggling, and extra fragile by the death of her mom. They asked me if I would do the funeral, and at the church where they had all been a part of.

On the day of the funeral I was amazed at all the people who came. Young women and other foster moms in the hundreds from all over the GTA and the province came. Many of the young women spoke about Rhonda and how her love, often tough love, had saved them. Other foster moms spoke about how they had learned from Rhonda, how to love even when it was so often a challenge. Even as Rhonda struggled with her own demons of addiction, she found healing in opening her heart as a mom to others.

And this, my friends, is also the story of Mary and the story of Christmas. Without love, and a love powerful enough to move through difficult situations, obstacles and relationship challenges... without such love there is no future for our world and no future worth having for us either. May this Christmas, in the midst of a pandemic, be one of those seasons where we learn something new in our call to learn love and our capacity to grow love from the inside out. And may God the Spirit visit us and move in and through us as energy, as flow and as relation... Amen.