



St. Paul's Church

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This is how we love each other

Following the lead of Presiding Bishop Curry, Bishop Stokes and the Task Force for Reentering, Re-opening, Reimagining have issued guidelines about the expectations for individual parishes as we begin to make plans to resume services. As of this writing, St. Paul's has submitted its response to a survey given to all parishes about specifics to hold worship services while maintaining the highest level of concern for everyone's health. It's not an easy task, as we are responsible not only to our parishioners in the conventional sense (our "active baptized members," new communicants and visitors) but the guests who have been with us for our evening service, many of whom we see currently in our evening food program.

I feel fortunate that we have faced little internal pressure to resume services "as soon as possible," as though we were intentionally dragging our feet on going back into our sanctuary. Proceeding with caution, abundant or not, has made it imperative that we be very deliberate

indeed, for ourselves, our guests and the numerous recovery groups that form part of our community. We would be doing ourselves a grave disservice if we were to rush anything, as we have to prepare both our space and ourselves for a very different worship experience, especially at the communion rail.

If you are like me, it is hard not to hear the final love commandment from Jesus behind this theme of resuming our worship. As in John's gospel, it is not happening against a background of tranquility. If this is how we love one another, it is happening in a world that is being upended, not only with the racial inequities laid bare by the protests we have seen and the disparities in access to health care. Many are becoming aware of the huge income disparities between white people and people of color, as well as the shameful gap in rates of incarceration. Jesus, of course, makes no distinctions, does not qualify his injunction for us to "love one another as I have loved you." It is our

discipleship that matters, as it is the only way we will be recognized as disciples, if we have love for one another.

That love will have to be foremost in our minds when we enter the sanctuary again. Personal distancing will be with us for some time, as will Holy Communion with the Host only. What we will need to remember is that these practices represent a stage through which we will be passing, not a permanent state-of-affairs. It will involve a lot of patience and frequent reminders about safe practices. But it is love we are trying to uphold, no matter how strange it feels. If we need a model, let it be from the Jewish historian Josephus, who said at the beginning of our faith, with all its outward uncertainties and persecutions, "Look how they love one another." Let it also be said about us, almost two-thousand years later, that it is love that defines us, no matter the short-term cost.

The Love of God

Of God's love we can say two things: it is poured out universally from the pope to the loneliest addict on the planet; and secondly, God's love doesn't seek value, it creates value. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we have love that we have value. Our value is a gift and not an achievement.

William Sloane Coffin

In my view, we are so used to using phrases like, "the love of God" that we forget they point in two directions at once. We believe that if we only loved God more, we could be happier, have fewer crises or live fuller lives. What Coffin points out is that the relationship is initiated by God, that the God who loved the world into being and loves God's creatures more than we can imagine (yes, even us), cares for us prior to and irrespective of any action of ours. In the economy of the Kingdom, we don't have to earn anything. God's love is a self-perpetuating entity that gives us value and meaning, prior to anything we do or say.

I have been thinking about this idea a great deal while watching the protests, the acrimony and political posturing that has attended them, and wondering if the people participating are aware of this quality at the heart of our identities. As I watched scenes of violence and mourned a

great deal of it, I had wondered if the folks involved realized the breadth of that love, that God's love is independent of our feelings and the transactional relationships we have with the world. God's love is above all our horse-trading, even above our propensity toward violence. It is why even demonstrations we deem just are so heart-breaking to watch.

The corollary to the universality of God's love is that, if we are to live into it fully, we have to be aware of the large swaths of our communities that are denied any hint of the equity with which it is poured out. It is hard, for instance, to believe that God's love is stretched-out toward all peoples when, in the health crisis we are now experiencing, people of color are dying at several times the rates of white people because of unequal access to health care; where the rates of incarceration among young black men are unacceptably high and where

there is a conspicuous lack of unifying civic leadership at the highest levels of government in response to recent protests.

Our value is a gift and not an achievement. The irony in Coffin's words is that we are a nation of achievers; in fact, our own sense of value depends on what we do. So the question becomes not what are we going to do in response but how are we going to be. Respecting the dignity of every human being begins in the recognition that no one deserves the love of God; it is freely given and our merit doesn't even enter into the equation. The first step is our being toward one another the people we were created to be, fully loved participants in God's ongoing work of creation. Only in the acceptance of that status can we begin to address the deep inequities that cry out from our streets toward our hearts.

The Primacy of Love

⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1: 9-11

If you are like me, these past months have been a restless time, maybe too restless for my own good. I have taken on several projects in addition to the work at St. Paul's, ones that I have enjoyed but have proven my own suspicions about myself. Like many people, I like the idea of gaining mastery over something or at least knowing something about it. What I am saying to myself, as I have over the last several months, is that I am a passive vessel for whatever thoughts I care to pour into my head. Often, there is nothing wrong with this. I have prayed for each person on our parish list; to the degree I am able, I have tried to keep the parish unified and made sure that our community of faith is valued and cared-for (That I think this enterprise begins with my own initiative and not God's is very problematic, but never mind for now). In addition, I have begun a habit of reading all the things I should have read before now (Help, I've fallen in the third book of Montaigne's *Essays* and I can't get up).

The trouble is that all these activities are simply a product of habit, one by

which I tend to measure my worth in God's eyes. Augustine reminded us what slaves to our habits we are, so much so that it is hard to determine whether our will is ever free. If there is one salient quote from him, it is one that used to sit on my desk until I lost it in a move, so I have to remind myself all the more how true it is: "O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you." It is from his *Confessions*, which is the story not only of a conversion but of how our minds work. It is also about how the way we have been raised affects our habits, which, in turn inform our will, so that willing the correct things is a very complicated business.

I took some solace in Paul's letter to the Philippians, which appears to give primacy to knowledge, "to help you determine what is best... to produce the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ," as if what we know is the best preparation for the Christian life. If we bother to read Paul closely, however, that primacy is given to love, that it is not what we *know* but what we *love* that determines who

we are. If that love includes, as it has for me in the last few weeks, the renewed commitment to the flourishing of all people around us, regardless of background, nationality or skin color, this has felt like the beginning of a very hopeful time. It is also a time riddled with uncertainty about how we are going to get there. Unmistakable to me, however, is the reminder that God has made a commitment to the entire human race. There are no disposable people, no one whose needs we can safely discount, no one whose needs can be ignored in the expanse of God's economy.

If anything has come out of this time for me, it is the idea that I cannot be a passive receptacle of knowledge or good works or anything else. The God who loved the world into being wants us to continue that creative work. The world depends on it, and whatever we experience as the new normal will be shot through with God's love for all of us, for our sake and for the harvest of righteousness to which we are bearing witness.

Cleaning Day!

Please confirm with Father Mark that you are able to help clean the sanctuary the morning of Saturday, June 27. We will have plenty of gloves and cleaning supplies as well as disinfectant for flat surfaces. Let me know if you can join us—thank you!

Thank you!

Many thanks to Val and Eldiean Morgan, Buffy Walker, Betty Fletcher and, of course, Mitchell for all their work in helping with the food program these past weeks. Mitchell has pointed out to me that the parish always comes through for our guests, and the level of tenacity in keeping these programs going through difficult times has been extraordinary. We are all in your debt.

Camp Faith!

Camp Faith is coming up (July 13 -27) and we need craft supplies! When you are out shopping, please think of us: we need crayons, coloring books, popsicle sticks and Elmer's glue. Thank you for your consideration!