

A Sunday Devotional for People and Families at Home
The First Church of Evans
Week Twelve - Sunday, June 7, 2020

Greetings from Jerusalem Corners,

My phone calls and emails this week have been full of gratitude for the beauty of Spring and hope for the day when we can gather in one room as one family to worship again. On the other hand, once again, the death of an African American in police custody has stirred the whole country into a storm of outrage and recrimination. This week, Elder and Personnel Chair, Gail Galfo, challenges us to remember and hold onto God's love as the foundation for our own lives and the healing force that can see us through all the change and sadness and conflict that swirls around us.

Call to Worship

1 John 4:10-12

*In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us
and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.
Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.
No one has ever seen God; if we love one another,
God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*

An Opening Prayer

Holy Father,

We learn from your gospel that you not only command and teach love, but that you are love. It is from you that we must learn the art of love. Please forgive us that our hearts are inclined to think first and foremost about ourselves, and fill us with your Spirit to love you as our Father, each other as brother and sister, and the people around us as creatures made in your image who need your forgiveness and love; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Devotional

John 3:16,17

Gail Galfo, Elder and Personnel Chair

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that
whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,
But in order that the world might be saved through him.*

John 3:16 is memorized by our First Communicants, and hopefully, carried with them throughout their lives. Jesus told us these words in order that we might always remember that to know him is to believe in him, and to believe in him opens the gates of eternal life to us. The words are simple, yet the message is so strong that it's hard to ignore. Believing in Christ allows us to believe in God, His power, His might, His dedication and most importantly His love for us. Further along, Jesus tells God that although he has done his very best to convince everyone he came in contact with that God's love is omnipotent, there are still those who do not follow the light - Jesus. Can you imagine how frustrated Jesus must have been?

These verses are so important to be remembered, especially during times of natural disasters, a full-blown pandemic, and changes to our lifestyles never before witnessed by most of us. We blame, we point fingers, we become frustrated and impatient. Believing in the Light of the World can only serve to bring us from darkness into the light, to better days ahead.

One of the most important things I've learned in the past few months is that loving and believing in Jesus Christ, believing in the goodness, the love and the blessings he gives to us, is so often taken for granted. But when the darkness comes upon us, when we're forced to abide by others' rules, when we're required to change our lifestyle, when we're required to isolate ourselves from others, we need only to look at the Light to realize this, too, is a blessing. Recognizing that our lives are in God's hands allows us to look forward, to appreciate the new things we've learned over the past few months, and to recognize all that is good in life. It's reaching out with a phone call to someone who is alone. It's praying more than ever before. It's planting a garden, talking, really talking, to our children and grandchildren. It's playing board games without being bored. It's about reaching out to others in ways we never took the time to do before. When we truly believe, we pass that belief along; we pass along comfort, compassion and love.

But none of this would be possible without God's love. Were we not searching for the Light, we would have stayed in the darkness, never believing that anything good would become of a pandemic.

For God so loved, and still loves, the world. He had his Son die for our sins, that we might be forgiven and given a fresh start. As we grow in faith, the promise of eternal life becomes all the more real to us. While anger, fear and frustration many times distracts us from what we believe, we've got to hold onto the Light a little harder, a little longer, and trust that God will see us through.

As Carl Mende mentioned in earlier devotionals, my thoughts too drift to songs long sung and remembered. I love singing the words to Lamb of God, especially the third verse, when feeling, scared, alone or doubtful:

"I was so lost, I should have died,
But You have brought me to your side
To be led by Your staff and rod,
And to be called a lamb of God "

Hopefully, we will soon be together in our sanctuary. Until then, let's not forget we are all one, we are still united, and we are believers in God's love. Carry that with you until we meet again

Offering

Proverbs 3:9,10

*Honor the LORD from your wealth and from the first of all your produce,
then will your barns be filled with plenty, and your vats overflowing with new wine.*

Thank you for the faithfulness you have shown Christ and his kingdom during this season. Please mail what your heart leads you to give to:
The First Church of Evans, Attn: Cindy Fanara, P.O. Box 364, Derby, NY, 14047.

(What follows is the script for the worship video we will offer this week via a link on our website: TheFirstChurchofEvans.com.
If you cannot access the video, you can still join us by reading and praying and singing through the printed Order of Worship that follows.)

Greeting and Prayer

Hymn

"Love Divine, All Loves Excelling"

See Insert

Table Talk

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:8a

Pastor Stephen Ridge

*And I will show you a still more excellent way.
If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but I do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
And if I have prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith so as to move mountains, but I do not have love, I am nothing.
If I sell all my possessions and deliver up my body so that I can boast, I gain nothing.
Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, love does not boast, it is not arrogant.
It is not rude, it does not seek its own way, it is not provoked, it does not keep an account of wrongs.
It does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth.
Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never fails...*

The Apostles taught the early Christians to view the arrival of Jesus on the world stage as an invasion from heaven, God the Son becoming one of us and setting in motion a supernatural process in which people from all over the world would be liberated from sin and self and curse and begin to live according to the justice and values and affections that live in heaven. It was an exciting time to be alive with Jesus feeding thousands where there was no food, healing where there was no cure, taming the weather and walking on water and bringing life where there was no hope. And after the resurrection, the apostles and disciples got into the game, the Holy Spirit descending on them as he had on Jesus years before, and the whirlwind of signs and wonders and miracles repeated itself all over the Roman Empire. And Paul wrote about it to the Christians in Corinth, the baptism of the Holy Spirit accompanied by a swirl of gifts, the apostles on the move, prophets in the pews, saints who spoke with an eloquence that opened the mind and set the heart aflame, ordinary people filled with supernatural wisdom and faith and compassion, music to stir the imagination, sometimes sung in languages from heaven that only angels had ever sung before.

So it's no wonder that some number of Paul's readers got so swept up in the heavenly phenomena, signs and wonders, wisdom and eloquence, boldness and sacrifice that the love which brought Jesus here in the first place began to get lost. So Paul began to write of himself as one of the Christians who might be in danger, "*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but I do not have love...if I have prophecy...know all mysteries and knowledge, but do not have love, I am nothing*" Paul wrote. "*If I sell all I have and give my life over, so I can boast, I gain nothing.*" Paul said.

Because ultimately, God didn't send his Spirit into our hearts to give us power to show how wonderful we are. Ultimately, underneath and behind the signs and wonders and eloquence and exploits was supposed to live a love that was simple and selfless and stable and faithful. "*Love is patient,*" Paul wrote. God's love, heaven's love waits for people to come around. "*It is kind,*" Paul said, love teaches us to want what is best for and think what is best about each other. "*It is not jealous...does not boast...is not arrogant.*" The Spirit teaches us a love that doesn't need the space and notice and acclaim that our fallen souls crave. "*It is not rude...is not provoked...does not keep account of wrongs.*" God's love nurtures our souls so that we don't need to throw our elbows, to cultivate outrage, to keep count of our injuries. "*It does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth.*" It follows that to love God and be loved by God frees us from that restlessness that wants and needs and rebels at the fences and boundaries God set up to keep us safe and whole.

"*Love bears all things,*" Paul wrote. Of course, Christ's love bore our sins to the cross, so this notion of love bearing what we cannot certainly applies here. But the verb Paul uses here for "bear" can also mean "cover".

It could mean, "*Love covers all things...*". And then the notion would become that God possesses a love for us that, when he sees us go wrong, it leads him to cover our disgrace, to shield us from shame. It is what Ruth asked of Boaz when she tucked herself under his blanket and proposed marriage. "*Spread your wings over your servant,*" she said to him, "*for you are a redeemer!*" It is what the unclean woman in the gospels wanted from Jesus when she grabbed the fringe of his robe. The gesture was a cry to be covered and that is what Jesus gave her when he saw her trouble. "*Take heart, my daughter,*" Jesus said, "*your faith has saved you!*"

So, God's love, heaven's love, begins at the cross by covering those things that would otherwise render us unworthy of love. And it goes on from there to see a future where we become better and better. "*Love believes all things,*" Paul wrote, "*hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails...*" Heaven's love is God's gift to us in Christ and it is the gift we also owe each other.

Prayer *Matthew 7:7* “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you.”

Please keep the governing authorities in prayer that they make wise decisions in response to the pandemic and to the recent racial conflict and civil unrest. Please keep our medical people and other first line public servants and their families in prayer as they selflessly face danger to save the lives of sick and vulnerable people. Please remember our elderly loved ones who are at home or in care facilities. Please especially remember those who have lost loved ones during the pandemic, most recently the family of Ann McCaulley-Small. Please also pray for Richard Pearson in the hospital and Eric DePan and Jerry Galfo as each of them recovers at home from surgery.

Hymn

“Lamb of God”

See Insert

An Ancient Benediction

Numbers 6:24-26 "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the LORD lift his countenance upon you and give you his peace."

With love from The First Church of Evans, till our eyes meet and our hands touch again.