

Pentecost 8 July 26 2020 Proper 12

One of the extraordinary and great things to happen this week is the “Wall of Moms” in Portland, OR. If you haven’t seen them yet, they are pretty much what their name implies: young, middle aged, older mothers, even a sprinkling of grandmothers. They started showing up at the demonstrations in Portland because of their concern that unknown Federal officers, keeping both their identities and their affiliation hidden, these Federal officers have detained people in Portland, hauling them off in unmarked mini-vans. This is almost unprecedented in our nation and so in response, the “Wall of Moms” now show up at the demonstrations. This was the idea of a middle aged mother of two, named Bev Barnum. She is Mexican American, and she says she was totally shocked to see that peaceful demonstrators hoping to get out the message of Black Lives Matter being illegally detained. Also, she saw that the ones being detained simply while walking down the street were young people, literally someone’s children. As a mother, she felt compelled to protect these children; so she hopped on Facebook and put out a call. The moms showed up and took their position between the protesters and the Federal officers. It is sad to say, that despite their peaceful protest and their intention to shield the demonstrators, the Federal officers shot tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets and beanbags at the “Wall of Moms.” This did not deter them from their mission, however, and now every evening they have been on location to protect the protesters from the Federal agents. Now they have been joined by a “Wall of Dads” (who, I’m sorry to report, have not been very effective! But God bless

them for being there) and most recently there was a “Wall of Vets” who set up between the Federal officers and the “Wall of Moms” and the protesters. Needless to say, the “Wall of Vets” were tear gassed, pepper sprayed and shot at with rubber bullets. There is a long history of mothers standing strong for social justice, especially in Latin American, where mothers regularly stood up to the brutal authoritarian regimes of Augusto Pinochet and Juan Perron in Chile and Argentina. While I am heartened to see the courage and spunk of these mothers in Portland, I despair that it has come to the point in our nation that women feel it necessary to come out as a “Wall of Moms.” But God bless them and may the Federal officers stand down and peace be restored to the streets of Portland and other communities.

Prayer: Most merciful God, as we hear your word of the coming of your kingdom, may your word open our hearts and our minds to follow your will; this we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

One of my favorite books in the Bible is Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*, and one of my favorite passages in *Romans* is this eighth chapter we have heard read the last couple of weeks. The image from the reading we heard last week, that the whole of creation has been groaning in labor pains, giving birth to a new hope, a hope for our deliverance, a hope that we will be set free, a hope which brings us to salvation. But as Paul says as well, we must wait for this hope in patience, a patience born from the trust that God is present for us and bringing this new hope to birth. I really like that image of expecting, just like waiting patiently for the child to be born. I can remember each time Elizabeth

was pregnant, and we lived through those nine months in expectation. I was always fond of the title of the book that was published a few years back for couples waiting for their child to be born, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. I thought that it is a clever title, but it also goes to the heart of the issue: filling in the gaps and letting an expectant mother know what to expect. To digress a little, I've always given expectant dads my two cents, my two pieces of advice, which are, if at the birth someone puts a pair of scissors in your hands and tells you to cut the umbilical cord, just do it; and second, don't drop the baby, and if you do, don't tell anyone! But back to Paul and his letter, that strong emphasis on the coming of a new hope, God giving birth to a new hope in our world is such a strongly held and powerfully expressed notion in this epistle that it always serves to buoy my faith, even in some of the most difficult times I have faced.

The words he heard this morning from Paul take this even deeper: it is in this weakness, the difficult times we face, the times when our spirits might be lagging, weary and worn down, it is just at times like these that God's Spirit of love comes to us, praying for us even when we don't have the words to pray, the Spirit of love leading us into the way of love, leading us to the embodiment of love, God's love in human form for us in Jesus. And then, as Paul asserts so boldly, "If God is for us, who is against us?" It is God in Jesus Christ who intercedes for us, bearing us up in the fullness of his love. Because of this, because of that great mercy and compassion, Paul goes on to ask, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" Then, then in a simple direct way, Paul

answers: will it be hardship? Could it be distress of persecution? What about famine or nakedness, or peril or sword? No, none of this. I'd note that Paul is not asking simply rhetorical or hypothetical questions here; these are all things he experienced at one time or another in his life, these are the difficulties and challenges he faced day in and day out during his missionary work and travel from Jerusalem to Antioch, throughout Asia Minor, Greece and on the journey in chains to Rome, Paul faced all this and more, yet he continued on in hope. Then Paul makes his confession, Paul shows us his heart, and in words that never fail to move me, he says, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." This simple, strong, direct statement, a true confession of faith that God's love in Jesus is full, fully surrounding us and fully embracing us, and Paul's firm conviction is that nothing can stand between him and the love of God in Jesus. Those words, that simple confession, never fails to bear me up in the good days and most importantly, in the dismal days as well.

This same sentiment is expressed by Jesus, but in a very different form. In the parables, especially those we heard read this morning, in these little short stories, these graphic illustrations taken from everyday life, Jesus tells those who will listen to him what the coming of God's kingdom will be about: in the most unexpected fashion, breaking in when unlooked for, appearing unbidden and unsought: out of the smallest of seeds, the birds of the air find a

home, a man is overjoyed finding a treasure in a field, as the net is thrown over the side of a boat, fish of every kind are caught until it is full. These little vignettes, little stories tell of the coming of the kingdom of heaven, God's reign on earth, when God's mercy and justice, God's peace and love will fill our reality. This week I have been thinking about these images, and now some parables like Jesus's have come to me as well: the kingdom of heaven is like a dog on a hot summer day, jumping into a pond to cool off; the kingdom of heaven is like walking in the woods and seeing the sun streaming through the trees and spotlighting a flower growing in the forest; the kingdom of heaven is sitting down to a meal of freshly grilled waffles and all the maple syrup you could want. Just these small but unexpected joys, small experiences in every day life which show you the depth of God's love and care throughout creation, love springing up in unlooked for places, but a joy when you catch a glimpse, sometimes however fleeting, a glimpse of God's truth and beauty in the midst of all that is going on around us.

As I have said now Sunday after Sunday in our sermons, we live in a topsy turvy world, now in a place of uncertainty and fear. The pandemic which ignited all this has come roaring back in many parts of our nation, death literally overtaking thousands each week, and of course the racial inequalities unmasked by this coronavirus pandemic have persisted even as the center of the storm has moved south and west in America. The economic devastation is starting to pick up, with an increase of people filing for unemployment, the first increase since March, and with government support programs running out

for workers, leaving many facing eviction and hunger, all this in the midst of this global pandemic. And finally, the protests and calls for racial justice, which I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, are continuing, which is a good thing, but the repressive police tactics employed in some cities, are moving these protests in a more violent direction. It is indeed a scary time, an unprecedented moment in history, and as I've become fond of saying, perhaps overly fond but I think it fits, with everything happening so fast and changing so radically, we don't even know what's going to happen next Tuesday.

In the face of all these conditions for our world right now, I am very thankful that we can continue to gather together for worship each Sunday and in our other activities during the week as the congregation of Good Shepherd. We can continue to seek guidance from the scriptures and in our prayer and fellowship with each other, to reenforce and deepen our faith. Just like Paul wrote to the Church in Rome, in the midst of hardships, famine, pandemic or calls for racial justice, God is indeed here for us, and there is nothing, no thing, not death nor life, nor rulers, nor powers, nor height, nor depth that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. I stand by that statement, and it gives me the faith to stand on. And of course, I'm thankful, thankful to God and thankful to each one of you that we can stand together in the midst of all these raging crises. I am deeply grateful. We are learning together now to be the people of God, to be the beloved community, to be the church in a new way and I deeply believe that as time goes on our witness and our faith will both continue to rise to the challenge and will strengthen us to serve in the Name of

the Risen Christ. I have noted, however, over the past couple of months that because of the physical distancing, because of the need to stay apart that I feel more disconnected from our wider community, out of touch with our Barre neighbors and friends. That's why I'm very thankful that this weekend a number of members of Good Shepherd are preparing well over 500 meals to feed our neighbors, to make a connection with them for nourishment and sustenance even if we cannot interact and talk together. That to me is a joy, just like the kingdom of heaven Jesus depicts in his parables: the kingdom of heaven is like a fierce little congregation in Central Vermont that rose to the task of feeding the ones Jesus calls the least of these, and carried out that task with grace and good will. As we go forward this week and in the weeks to come, we will pray that God guides us to a deeper understanding of being the church in this new time, to show what the kingdom of heaven looks like and to live ever more deeply into a confident faith that God's love in Christ Jesus is always with us, surrounding us and embracing us, energizing us and guiding us, and that nothing, nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Thanks be to God for these words to stir our hearts and to assure our souls, thanks be to Christ for embodying that divine love and thanks be to the Spirit of love for leading us onward. Amen.