

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • MAY 26, 2019
EASTERTIDE

Call to Worship

Let us join our hearts to God's on this 6th Sunday of Easter:

When God tripped over the stars this week
and sent great lightning sparks across the night,
God's name was Power.

When God stood in the morning dew a few weeks back
and whispered Mary's name fresh from the tomb,
God's name was Life.

When God reached out hands to Thomas
and told him to hold on and follow,
God's name was Shepherd.

When God pours water this morning
and asks us to find heaven in every drop,
God's name is Grace.

When God shook us awake today
and hollowed out an unused moment in front of us to step into,
God's name is Creator.

When God found us waiting here
in the space between heaven and earth, now and not yet,
God's name is Love.

Friends, let us open our hearts and minds
to worship the God of many names...

Adapted from "God of Many Names," Roddy Hamilton, and posted on **Mucky Paws**.

<http://www.nkchurch.org.uk/index.php/mucky-paws>

Litany

Based on Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make God's face to shine upon us,
that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us.
May God continue to bless us, let all the ends of the earth revere God.

The Scripture

1 John 4:19-21

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

The Message

"Justice and *Imago Dei*... What's Love Got to Do with It?"

Martha Jolly

Will you pray with me? God of wisdom, I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts might be acceptable in your sight. You ARE love in our midst, our strength, and our guide. Amen.

Today's text commands us to love others in the way that God loves us – deeply, unstintingly, and undeservedly. It also holds us accountable if we do not! According to the Scripture, we are liars if we say we love God and do not show that same grace-filled love to our brothers and sisters... our neighbors. In particular, 1 John 4 casts a vision of justice for those on the margins – the poor, widows and orphans, and the stranger, the immigrant. This is a high bar and one that challenges us to stand against the dominant narrative that tells us to look out for number 1, that people just need to work harder, or that things and people that are different from us are to be feared.

At this moment in our nation's story we see our immigrant neighbors and those living in border areas suffering in the face of a broken immigration system. Media images often portray immigrants in ways that rob them of their dignity and self-respect, that make it hard to see them as God bearers. I recognize this is an issue that is fraught with difficulty for many of us; there are deep tensions between God's love command and current immigration enforcement practices. Some may not think church is the place for talking about these issues... but if not here, where? I am convinced that people of faith have a witness to offer, a voice of holy inspiration. So, I want to ask each of us to set aside that divisive, dominant narrative for a time this morning and instead see ourselves as God sees us, as receivers of Holy, unstinting love.

The tension we experience between life in the world and the life of faith would have been very familiar to the community of 1 John in the first century. Some scholars suggest that 1 John was written as letter to his own congregation, one fractured by division and tension. That it was written to the faithful remnant as a reminder of who and whose they are. In spite of the division and animosity from within and outside of

his community, however, the author of our text never advocates hatred in return. Instead, he directs the community's compass to stay fixed on Jesus.

In 1 John 4:19-21 the author describes the character of love, first and foremost, the ethical implications of love... loving God must bear fruit in action that seeks shalom - the flourishing, security, and dignity of all of God's beloveds. It is *agape* love.

In searching for an understanding of *agape* love, I find Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff's explanation of *agape*¹ especially helpful. He describes it as having two parts:

- Attractive love – appreciates and stands in awe of our neighbor's enormous worth as one beloved by God and created in God's image
- Benevolence love – seeks our neighbor's shalom: flourishing, security, dignity

Agape, which originates in God, cannot be only vertical – God-believer – but must be balanced by and coexistent with horizontal love – believer-brother/sister/all humanity. *These vertical and horizontal axes of Christian life, you might notice, echo the image of the cross.* Those whom God loves must also love their brothers and sisters, recognizing the *imago dei*, the image of God, in each one.

I grew up knowing that our family included what we would call today an unaccompanied migrant youth. My uncle Henry escaped from Paris just ahead of the Nazi occupation in 1940, and arrived in the US as a 14-year-old, unaccompanied Jewish teen. He left behind a sister and grandmother in Paris, after his grandmother sent him ahead to find a place for the three of them in America. Somehow, Henry ended up at the YMCA in Santa Barbara, CA and my uncle Robert found him and brought him home, a little like a lost kitten. There was no question that my grandparents, Margaret and Hubert, would find a place for Henry and he became part of our family, of our story. Henry was never able to find his sister and grandmother... it is almost certain that when Paris fell in 1940, they were sent to a concentration camp where they later perished.

My uncle Robert recognized not Henry's differences – that he spoke little English, was of a different faith and nationality, but how he was, like Robert - a teenager, someone's son, brother, grandson. Uncle Robert's 14-year-old self wouldn't have used these words at the time, but he so clearly saw Henry as a beloved child of God, no more and no less than himself.

Father Richard Rohr describes it this way:

You are created in the image of God from the very beginning, as described in Genesis 1:27.

¹ Excerpted from <https://cct.biola.edu/tired-poor-huddled-masses-dont-want/>

This is the basis for God's justice: Since everyone is made in the image of God, then we need to recognize, honor, and respect the image of God in everyone. No exceptions.²

Every single human. No exceptions. And Jesus gave us so many examples about what it looks like to recognize, honor and give dignity to each one – remember the woman at the well, those who lingered outside the city gates in search of healing, inclusion, the injured man and the Samaritan, himself a stranger... Indeed, the Holy One teaches us over and over again about our sacred duty to provide for the most vulnerable among us.

This is where our own humanity can get in the way, and I'm not gonna lie, this can be hard. Because God loves us, we are called, in fact, we are required to love others. From 1 John 4:21, *And God gave us this command: Those who love God must also love their brothers and sisters.* In God lingo, brothers and sisters = neighbors = the stranger... all of humanity, no exceptions.



The image³ on the bulletin and above reminds us that Jesus experienced migration... both from the land of his birth and in a much deeper sense, in the world. Jesus was an immigrant...

And in this image, is there not some resonance with this moment in our history? Mary and Joseph make the risky choice to escape to safety in a foreign land with their small son, Jesus. Who among us would not seek safety for our family?

Like Jesus, most of us are immigrants, as well. Most of us take some pride in knowing about our heritage and where our people came from.

As we arrived for worship, we were invited to place a pin on the map, locating where our ancestors originated. My people on my mother's side of the family came from Sweden in the 1860s and on my dad's side, from France and the UK.

We all have a history from somewhere else, a story of migration, of being the stranger in a new land. Not all of these stories are happy ones. Some of us came to this land because of forced migration - kidnapped and sold into slavery. Many of us came because our family couldn't feed or house us in the homes of our ancestors – that's my

• ² You Are the "Imago Dei," Wednesday, June 20, 2018, Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, <https://cac.org/you-are-the-imago-dei-2018-06-20/>

³ *La Sagrada Familia (The Holy Family)*, Icon created by Kelly Latimore, used with permission. https://kellylatimoreicons.com/gallery/img_2361

family story. Those few of us who trace their family story to the First People of this continent have a different story of forced migration. We all have a story...

As Christians, our sacred story is rooted in the biblical narrative, which invites us every day to tune our hearts with God's and suspend the narrative the world wants us to hear... about what is just, about who we should be afraid of. This is a narrative that is rooted in fear, rather than hope. As people of faith, we are called to bring holy imagination and hope into conversations about justice... in fact I believe that holy imagination and hope are critical to shaping justice for all of God's beloveds.

On a Tuesday in February of this year, Guy and I spent part of a day at a respite center in McAllen TX operated by Catholic Charities. The staff and volunteers gave us a quick orientation to our tasks for the day and soon after, busses rolled up from the CBP detention center in McAllen. As the busses emptied of their 250+ occupants, a line formed at the side of the building, a line of mothers, fathers, young children, and elderly men and women. Most of them carried nothing, had no shoelaces or belts, and looked emotionally battered and exhausted.

As the line began to slowly progress into the center, it is the practice of each staff and volunteer to clap and shout "Bienvenidos! Welcome!" As this welcome was heard, the faces began to change, on some faces smiles, on others, tears began to stream downfaces. For these beloved children of God, this was the first word of compassionate welcome they had heard since entering the US.

As I watched these faces, I heard Barbara Brown Taylor's words in my mind...
*"You shall love the stranger first of all because you know what it is to be a stranger yourself. Second of all, you shall love the stranger because the stranger shows you God."*⁴

On that day, we knew God's love in the faces of the stranger.

God commands us to love. It is our call and responsibility to act with agape love, as Nicholas Wolterstorff describes it... a love that stands in awe of the enormous worth of our neighbors, created, like us, in the image of God. It is a love that seeks not just survival for our neighbors, but the same flourishing that we seek for ourselves and our loved ones.

What do we Jesus followers do in light of the deep tension between the political reality of immigration practices and the love command... do we ignore it, do we speak out against it, do we stand in love with our immigrant brothers and sisters?

⁴ From *An Altar in the World*, p.97, Barbara Brown Taylor

In the words of Cornel West, “*Never forget,*” writes Cornel West, “*that justice is what love looks like in public.*”⁵

Amen?

Benediction

Oración del Migrante - The Migrant's Prayer⁶

(found in the pocket of a Central American migrant who died in the desert)

Let's join our voices, and hold the life of this migrant and others who have lost their lives in our hearts as we read, knowing each to be a beloved child of God.

The journey towards you Lord, is life.
To set off, is to die a little.
To arrive is never to arrive, until one is at rest with you.
You, Lord, experienced migration.
You brought it upon all men who know what it is to live;
who seek safe passage to the gates of heaven.
You drove Abraham from his land, father of all believers.
You shall remember the paths leading to you,
the prophets and the apostles.
You yourself became a migrant from heaven to earth. Amen.

⁵ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6176.Cornel_West

⁶ https://www.worldprayers.org/archive/prayers/adorations/the_journey_towards_you_lord_is_life.html