

Reconnecting with Love  
I Corinthians 13, John 4.7-21  
August 20, 2017  
Pentecost +11A  
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I was raised in a moderate, Baptist congregation in Mobile. As 20th century Baptist struggles go, we were the kind of church that helped start and support the local Baptist college only to lose that relationship in the SBC wars of the 1980s and 90s. At the time, it was a congregation truly moderate in all things—neither the certitude and absolutism common to the day’s conservative evangelicals nor the vocal justice-seeking of Baptist progressives. So it is curious to me that I picked up on the certitude and absolutism, borrowed from a prominent megachurch in town, in my high school years. Terrified they could be right and my salvation hang in the lurch with every viewing of an R-rated movie, I gave away Beastie Boys CDs and bought the Newsboys instead. A poor trade, in retrospect. But I was afraid I’d misstep, afraid the small choices of my sin would make me unlovable, afraid God really was the Zeus-Santa hybrid we’ve been told about and was ready to zap me onto the naughty list at any turn. Can you hear the anxiety in that? The dangerous perfectionism. The pursuit of a capricious, abusive God who may be incapable of returning the love directed toward that heavenly throne.

*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.<sup>1</sup>*

When we approach scripture, I always say the first two questions to ask the text are, “What is this text telling us about who God is? What is this text telling us about who we are in relation to God?” The story of God begins and ends in love. The story of who we are is rooted in that same Divine love. Somewhere along the way, we got the story wrong. And even if we were studying and worshiping in moderate or progressive congregations with different takes on theology and spirituality, we were most likely shaped by the Christ-haunted landscape Flannery O’Connor described. And so, we have some unlearning to do.

We’ve come to the end of this Summer series inspired by *The Rebirthing of God* by John Philip Newell. Newell speaks of rebirthing in our understanding of who God is and who we are in relation to God. In the church, we must pay attention to “what is deepest in us coming forth again” and “what is at the heart of all things—made of God

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<sup>1</sup> | John 4.18

—being set free to emerge in radically new ways.” In *The Rebirthing of God* Newell “is pointing to a radical reemergence of the Divine from deep within us.” He writes, “We do not have to create it. We cannot create it. But we can let it spring forth and be reborn in our lives. We can be part of midwifing new holy births in the world.”<sup>2</sup>

This is beautiful, right? Something new is radically emerging or reemerging from deep within us and that something new is of God. We are invited to midwife these new holy births in our world. But Newell also says this new birth is part of a truth that most of us in here are still working to comprehend: “the walls of Western Christianity are collapsing...In another twenty-five years, much of the Western Christian household, as we have known it, will be no more.” He doesn’t dance around this but goes straight for the punch and reminds us that the birth of a new thing necessarily follows the death of a former thing.

Newell notes “three main responses or reactions to this collapse.” The first is denial. The second is anxiety. But the third way (and we’re growing increasingly fond of third way thinking here) “is to ask what is trying to be born that requires a radical reorientation of our vision. What is the new thing that is trying to emerge from deep within us and from deep within the collective soul of Christianity?”

“As people with the love-longings of God at the heart of our beings, how will we welcome the new thing that is trying to emerge within us? And then Newell asks us to hold onto one more question, “what is it that we need to let go of to prepare the way for the new birthing [of the church]?”<sup>3</sup>

Newell ends his book where he began—reminding us that we have been created in the image of God, and that necessarily means we have the love-longings of God at the heart of our beings. We are breathed into being by love. Therefore we absolutely must breathe love out from our beings if we are living in the ways of God.

*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.*

This is beautiful. We are on board with this. Love not fear. God is love. We are made in love. We are shaped for love. Excellent. Beautiful. Love wins! Hooray! We can do this!

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<sup>2</sup> John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity’s Struggle for New Beginnings*, pp. ix-x

<sup>3</sup> Newell, p. xi

Until there are obstacles and challenges. And you know we must express this love in the face of obstacles and challenges. These words from I John 4 were spoken to people in an emerging church millennia ago who were watching an old way of gathering pass away just as a new way emerged. These radical shifts produce anxiety because we humans like certitude and absolutism. And so the first-century Jesus community wanted to draw lines around the emerging thing. Who could practice? Who couldn't practice? Who was getting it right? Who was getting it wrong? How big and high and wide and deep is the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?<sup>4</sup> The author of I John answers their questions: the boundaries are big and open. Everyone who wants to be on this Jesus Way gets to be on it. And the love we know from Jesus is high and wide and deep because it is the very same love of God.

*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*<sup>5</sup>

How *kumbaya* is this Way? Is this a saccharine sweet affection for all people? I don't know about you, but I don't particularly love when people describe me as "sweet." I'm a lot of things, but I'm not sure "sweet" is one of my favorite descriptors. We look to Jesus and see what love looks like. Kind, yes. Bold, absolutely. Radical, expansive, transformative, sometimes confrontational. But sweet? Meh. So what is this love of God? Frederick Buechner, puts it like this:

"To say that love is God is romantic idealism. To say that God is love is either the last straw or the ultimate truth.

In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion, but an act of the will. when Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling. You can as easily produce a cozy emotional feeling on demand as you can a yawn or a sneeze. On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end, even if it means sometimes just leaving them alone. Thus in Jesus' terms, we can love our neighbors without necessarily liking them. In fact liking them may stand in the way of loving them by making us overprotective sentimentalists instead of reasonably honest friends.

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 3.18

<sup>5</sup> I John 4.7, 21

When Jesus talked to the Pharisees, he didn't say, 'There, there. Everything's going to be all right.' He said, 'You brood of vipers! how can you speak when you are evil!' (Matthew 12:34). And he said that to them because he loved them."<sup>6</sup>

Love is our starting place, and our starting place impacts the actions of our lives. Whether in the small gestures of daily routine or the bigger, deliberate acts of peace and justice work, we begin with our feet firmly planted in the love of God. I have thought about this quite a lot over the past week. One can never say, "Well, if I'd been there, I would have responded with *this* behavior." But I've been looking at the responses of counter-protestors in Charlottesville and wondering where I would have been that day. I hope with my clergy friends who locked arms and sang steadily and boldly of the love of God and the radical Way of Jesus. But I know the anger of the counter-protestors who could not believe what they were seeing and hearing. They were not prepared for the flood of emotions that overtook them as racial slurs and anti-semitic rhetoric flooded the air around them. Would I have responded with anger and shouting, too?

And then I have pictured the deliberate steps of the Civil Rights marchers moving across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 1965, only to be violently attacked by white supremacists on the other side. And their collective response was rooted not in anger but in love. Just two weeks later, they gathered again (with remarkable organization and preparation), and boldly stepped out in love to march from Selma to Montgomery. "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear," Dr. King said. Actions rooted in anger will not be as impactful as actions rooted in the kindness and compassion and love we know in Christ.

Loving people isn't an inactive thing. It doesn't mean we avoid conflict or truth-telling as though our silent dishonesty is an act of love. Love necessarily connects us to one another and to God, so it's terribly important. Newell says there is a "yearning at the heart of everything to move in relationship," and "our yearning is part of a cosmic yearning, to live in oneness...[D]eepest in us, is the yearning for union, to remember the oneness from which we have come, and to live and move as one again."<sup>7</sup>

*Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.*

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<sup>6</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p. 65

<sup>7</sup> John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God*, pp. 108-109

To better imagine what this kind of love looks like, Newell points to Simone Weil as “One of the great prophets of love in the modern world.”<sup>8</sup> A secular Jew, teacher, writer, and political activist in the midst of World War II, she fled her home and brought her parents to safety in the United States in May of 1942. However, months later “she returned to Europe, to the United Kingdom, so that she could be closer to her homeland. There she joined the provisional French government...as a writer to the French Resistance movement.

In her travels, she became a great mystic and embraced the essence of the Jesus story, particularly drawn to Jesus’ teaching on love. Weil wrote, “‘The Gospel makes no distinction between the love of our neighbor and justice...’ To love others is to come close to them, to identify with them, and to do all in our power to shelter them and work for their well-being.”<sup>9</sup> And Weil came to understand that action must be rooted in spiritual practice, stating, “in prayer we remember we are made of God and thus made of love.”<sup>10</sup>

Newell concludes his book with this beautiful, hopeful word about the way forward for the modern, western church:

“To choose love is not something we do once. It is something we need to choose again and again and again. As Weil says, ‘Love is a direction...not a state of soul.’ It is a journey of faithfulness, not a once-and-for-all choice...Some of us may be called to offer acts of endurance that will be celebrated in generations to come. But most of us are simply called to the much more hidden, and at times entirely overlooked, realm of love in family life, workplace, and the so-called common relationship of day-to-day life.”<sup>11</sup>

Taking us back to the beginning of his work, Newell then points to Mary Oliver’s “The Poet Visits the Museum of Fine Arts”

For a long time  
I was not even  
in this world, yet  
every summer

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<sup>8</sup> JPNNewell, p. 109

<sup>9</sup> JPNNewell, p. 115

<sup>10</sup> JPNNewell, p. 114

<sup>11</sup> JPNNewell, p. 118

every rose  
opened in perfect sweetness  
and lived  
in gracious repose,  
**in its own exotic fragrance,  
in its huge willingness to give  
something, from its small self,  
to the entirety of the world.**  
I think of them, thousands upon thousands,  
in many lands,  
whenever summer came to them,  
rising  
out of the patience of patience,  
to leaf and bud and look up  
into the blue sky  
or, with thanks,  
into the rain  
that would feed  
their thirsty roots  
latched into the earth—  
sandy or hard, Vermont or Arabia,  
what did it matter,  
the answer was simply to rise  
in joyfulness, all their days.  
Have I found any better teaching?  
Not ever, not yet.

Oliver describes the rose's "huge willingness to give/something, from its small self/to the entirety of the world." Newell observes, "It is this huge willingness that we are being asked to give. This is not to inflate our small self. It is just to say that this is what we have to offer, our small self, and we can offer it with huge willingness."

Jesus gathered them together in that upper room, broke bread and poured wine, washed their feet as a servant. And then he spoke:

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

When it comes to living out the radical love of God, Newell writes, “We have the capacity to do this. We are made as a means to love. It is God-given. The question is whether we will live what we truly are—love.”<sup>12</sup>

Oh friends, may it be so. May we live into who we truly are—may we know the love longings of God, rooted within us—and may the world know we are following on the Jesus Way because of the great love we have for all. We can do this together. We are made as a means to love. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> JPNNewell, p. 119