Learning to Embody God's Love

Homily for St. John's Episcopal Church by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given January 29, 2023
Third Sunday after the Epiphany: Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12

In the 18th century, there was a young Quaker boy named John Woolman. One day he was playing with throwing rocks, and he hit a robin and killed it. He discovered the robin had been sitting on a nest of baby birds, and realized that by killing the mother, he had also doomed her babies.

Having the soft heart of a child, he had not yet learned to numb himself. This experience gave him a great love and compassion for God and all living beings, and changed the trajectory of his life. He had had the visceral recognition that his actions had ripple effects in the world, whether he was aware of them or not. When he became an adult he worked for the abolition of slavery, but he also wore only white clothes because slaves were used to import dye from the West Indies. When he noticed that his prosperous grocery business was dulling his concern for economic justice for the less fortunate, he sold his business. He was an itinerant preacher who walked everywhere, refusing to use a horse because of how cruelly the boys who cared for the horses were treated. In every way, he sought to avoid doing harm or participating in systems that relied on violence to thrive.[1] What if we allowed ourselves to dream of acting with that much integrity? What could change in this world?

[1] For a more extended description of John Woolman's life and what we can learn from him, see Sallie McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Fortress Press, 2013).

This week we have seen the opposite—what terrible things can and do happen when human beings become numb to the suffering of others. It is unbearable what Memphis police did to Tyre Nichols, and what each of us is capable of when we close our hearts to empathy and compassion. But things do not have to be this way. Jesus' Way of Love and indeed all religious traditions seek a transformation of human consciousness and behavior, to move us from numbness to justice, unthinking violence to kindness and respect. The Scottish Churches Council has defined spirituality as "an exploration into what is involved in becoming human," which is "an attempt to grow in sensitivity to self, to others, to the non-human creation, and to God who is within and beyond this totality."[2]

In today's gospel reading, Jesus has just begun his public ministry. Healing has begun pouring out of him. When he sees the crowds, he goes up to a mountain, just like Moses had done to receive the Ten Commandments. Here Jesus gives one of his most important teachings, called the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the passage we heard today.

But unlike Moses, Jesus doesn't begin with a list of ten commandments. Instead he blesses those who suffer in this world. Blessed are the poor in spirit, and those who mourn, and the meek and the persecuted and the pure in heart, for they will see God. They will be comforted. They will inherit the earth. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven, says Jesus. These are upside down values that teach us how to understand God's heart. Jesus insists that mourning and persecution and hunger are not ultimate. This teaching is exquisitely sensitive to human suffering, and it frames everything else he teaches.

[2] Scottish Churches Council, "Working Party on Spirituality" (Dunblane: Scottish Churches House, 1977), 3, as quoted in Sallie McFague, ibid., chapter 2.

He goes on to explain the depths to which he wants us to love God and our neighbors. We are not just to avoid killing, but we must take care with our anger as well. We are not just to avoid cheating on our spouses, but we must also be respectful in how we look at and think about others. We are not only to love the loveable, but also to love those who truly don't deserve it, at least we don't think they do. What is required for the ethic of Jesus is a profound sensitivity to and respect for others, both human and otherwise. Everything else—right action and right relationship, the kind of behavior described in the ten commandments—flows from there.

The prophet Micah says something similar in the reading from the Hebrew scriptures today. What is it that God requires of us, the prophet asks? It isn't religious ceremony, sacrificing animals or otherwise trying to convince God that we are worthy. It is just to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

One of the main things that prevents sensitivity is numbness. Where in your life have you gone numb? Do you know what caused this numbness in you? What impact does this numbness have in your soul, in your relationships and impact on others? I know these questions are too big to answer fully right now. But consider reflecting on them this week. Imagine that the Spirit of Christ can meet you where you are numb with great tenderness and compassion. Imagine that the healing Jesus poured out in his life is still available to you, to nourish you and make you whole. Imagine you could risk growing in sensitivity again, one small moment at a time, one life-giving choice at a time. Imagine that the vitality and

beauty of the whole world is there in front of you, so that you can experience not just suffering but also awe and wonder and great love.

St. John's exists to provide a spiritual incubator to help us do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Here we encounter the essential sacredness of God, one another and this world. Here we learn and practice that all life belongs. We are nourished spiritually and foster creative expressions of life and faith and healing. St. John's exists to help us transform, to be the change we want to see in the world. To open us to the power of God's Spirit that really can heal us and make us new.

Today is our Annual Meeting, the day we look back at what has been and also to what future God wants to birth among us. It is wonderful and appropriate that the scriptures for today get at the root of why we are here in the first place. I hope you will all come to the Meeting to eat brunch and prayerfully give thanks and reflect on where God is leading us. You will hear about the crossroads St. John's is at as an institution. We are recovering from the pandemic, increasing again in attendance and vitality and engagement and generosity. Our current financial trajectory is also unsustainable, but we have abundant reserves to experiment with new ways of expressing our mission that may offer us a way forward. Through that whole conversation, I invite us to keep in mind our purpose. While we do need to experiment and innovate, the most important thing we can do is to tend our roots, the purpose of our being here, which is to learn to follow Jesus' Way of Love together. It is to learn to embody God's love, every minute of every day. This is not too high for us, too far away or too hard. It is the whole purpose of human existence.

So let us imagine what could happen if we dared to participate in God's dream to heal this world, by growing in sensitivity and respect to all life. Though we can't change the whole world, we can love God and our neighbors. Let us walk the Way of Love together, come what may. Amen.