

Love So Amazing, So Divine, Part II

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

April 17, 2022 Easter

Psalm 118; Isaiah 65:17-19, 25; John 20:1-18

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Easter Sunday.

Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online.

Imagine two followers of Christ, one from Jerusalem and one from Galilee, meeting as strangers at the empty tomb that first Easter morning, hearing the wild story of the risen Christ and seeing the burial cloth and wondering if this miracle could be true. Imagine how sharing that experience would make them not be strangers anymore.

If you were there or even if you were on Zoom on a disciple's phone, you would want to connect with everyone because the more you shared it with one another the more you would feel the beauty of that hope and joy. Jesus wanted us to feel this kind of oneness and unifying love, and today we have the chance to experience it again, so after the service please see one another with the eyes of Easter and the love of Christ and reach out to make sure every person here feels included in the joy, in person and on Zoom.

Please see the bulletin announcements and calendar items. Are there other announcements that need to be made this morning in the sanctuary or on Zoom?

I have one more... "LENT IS OVER!" We have emerged from the wilderness into a day of celebration. It is a day to put resurrection and new life above all else. Let those facing trials hand everything over to God because this day proclaims that God's power to renew and restore is greater than any earthly power, including death itself.

So do not worry about anything! Forget confessing your sins today—you are forgiven! The resurrection has released a force of cosmic light into the world that nothing can overcome.

If you do not feel joy today, try acting joyful anyway, in the hope that with God's help your behavior will change your attitude. Let us join in worship together with reckless abandon and loud jubilation!

It takes poetry to do this day justice. Here are the words of ee cummings. Let us pray...

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

Amen.

Sermon: Love So Amazing, So Divine, Part II

Last Sunday we sang from “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,”

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

The Prophet Isaiah was talking about that love in today's passage—so amazing and divine, so magical and powerful that it creates a new earth where “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together” and “They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.”

C.S. Lewis's Narnia book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* has a chapter entitled “Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time.” A boy named Edmund betrayed his brother and sisters and the good creatures of Narnia, and that betrayal of love set in motion Deep Magic from the Dawn of Time that gave the force of death the power to claim Edmund's life. But Aslan, the loving Christ-like lion, sacrifices himself in place of Edmund, a love so amazing, so divine that it works the *Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time* and gives Aslan victory over the force of death.

Violence and war and greed seem to work like magic, but there is a deeper magic.

Jesus showed us how to have the power of self-emptying. People Jesus has inspired like Mahatma Gandhi and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and thousands of everyday saints have

shown that the power of that deeper magic not only can overcome violence but can create a new earth at the same time.

The name that Jesus and Gandhi and King gave the deeper magic is love—not sentimental love, but agape, the self-emptying love we see in the life and death of Jesus. Gandhi said that this nonviolent soul force is the only power on earth greater than the atom bomb.

Amazing, divine love is the result of taking up our cross and losing our life to gain life, as Jesus calls us to do. Good Friday honors all that it costs us to choose the loss of the treasures that the ego seeks. Easter celebrates a treasure so much more amazing that it can inspire us to give our soul, our life, our all, in gratitude.

Jesus taught us a daily way to live that leads to the deepest resurrection magic. Somehow the ancient wisdom about this way got lost in the mainstream Protestant church, but with the renewal of the Christian contemplative tradition it is being rediscovered. It is so important that we memorize and internalize this that I have been talking about it almost every week.

The path begins in self-emptying, known as kenosis. The act of self-emptying and opening to the Spirit leads to an expansion and evolution of our heart and mind beyond what our less mature self could perceive or imagine. This moving beyond to a new level of consciousness is called metanoia. We gain an ever-widening perspective and spiritual maturity that enables us to see our true oneness with all people and creatures and the earth. Metanoia leads to compassion and love for all, which is the pure Spirit of God welling up within us. This kind of love is known as agape, and when we act out of it we help create a community that comes closer to the realm of God on earth. This last stage of the path is called koinonia.

We can see these at work in Mary Magdalene in the resurrection story in John. Deep grief can be a form of self-emptying, it can lead us beyond our ego's self-centeredness and its illusion of control into the realm of pure, humble love. That depth of grief kept Mary at the empty tomb of her beloved Jesus. The other disciples came and went, but Mary stood weeping, so she was there for Jesus to come to her. She underwent metanoia where her eyes and heart were opened to a new reality. She could see and believe him present before her.

We are left to imagine the rush of a love so amazing, so divine that she felt in that moment when she saw the deeper magic from before the dawn of time and the door of death swung open and the power of the way became clear. Filled with that agape love she went back to the broken

community of disciples and gave them a message that helped them heal and become one again in koinonia.

Mothers of all species are designed by nature to follow this sacred way. It is because of their self-giving emptiness that they are able to be filled with the miracle of new life. Motherhood can change a person's perspective and consciousness, including a clearer sense of the oneness of all life. Caring for a child can open a heart wide to a greater capacity for love. Healthy mothers instinctively do the work of koinonia, creating a home and family and community of nurture and support for their offspring.

Julia Ward Howe was such a mother. She modeled kenosis, metanoia, agape and koinonia at all levels of her life, in the home and in the nation and world. The path led her to be an abolitionist, fighting racism and slavery, and writing the Battle Hymn of the Republic. It led her also in 1870 to write the original "Mother's Day Proclamation," long before there was an official Mother's Day.

Julia Ward Howe had witnessed the suffering of the Civil War, and at the outbreak of yet another bloody war in Europe she called upon all the mothers of the earth to rise and demand universal disarmament and an end to all war and to pursue "the great and general interests of peace" for the express reason that their children would never again be asked to kill one another.

As we will hear next Sunday, the first thing Jesus said when he appeared to the disciples after his resurrection was "peace." Peace is the ultimate purpose of the path he taught, the goal that the sacred way keeps returning to again and again, peace in the fullest sense of shalom, inner serenity and outer well-being for all, a society founded on universal oneness and love.

Easter tells us to have faith in that sacred way, as foolish or counter-cultural or even impossible as it may seem. Keep following it, keep opening to its light and shining it through your own kenosis, metanoia, agape and koinonia. Easter tells us that this deeper magic will have victory over the forces of violence and division and oppression, and over death itself.

Who knows how many times over the centuries someone has walked out of these doors filled with Christ-like love and gone back into a conflict or impossible situation and found a way to bring peace to it, a way that only a love so amazing, so divine could create, a way out of the violent tomb and into the beautiful spring garden of God's realm of love and peace on earth. The love in our heart creates a little world of love around us.

I suspect this happens for somebody here every week. May it happen again today through us all. May Christ rise again through our love and bring this world peace.

Let us pray in silence...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

On Easter morning
we open our hearts and eyes
to see the sun rise.