

How Do We Love Our Neighbors ? Here Are Two Ways

April 28, 2024

1 John 4: 7-21

Would you pray with us?

God of Love,

You are in the soil, but you are not the soil...

You are *in* the water, but you are not the water...

You are *in* the air, but you are not the air.

God of Love, the soil is sick...

The water is sick...

The air is sick...

We await your healing.

At the cross, people mocked you and pierced you.

Some said,

“He healed others... Let him heal himself!”

You continue to be mocked... and scorned... and pierced
with impunity, without fear of consequence or punishment.

We mock the soil,

the water, and the air.

As it was before,

those with power and who act with violence will out.

But you would not respond with violence.

You raised instead a resurrection,

not a revolution.

The people are sick. ..

We need another resurrection.

A new beginning

We need mercy.

We need healing.

We need your love.

Your apostle John wrote, ‘Perfect love casts out fear.’”

We are afraid.

We do not love perfectly.

We need You

to love

through us.

Amen.

The apostle John reminded us that Jesus gave us a new commandment. John wrote that we have this new commandment: to love one another.

So when I say “commandment,” what do you hear? A commandment is a requirement? A law! A rule? And ordinance that, if broken, demands consequences? Punishment?

To love one another – perfectly – without fear may seem like an impossible expectation.

Perhaps to love is a choice, an act of will, a decision to do something beyond feeling like it. But as Christians, do we really have the choice – the option to say, “No”

Perhaps to love is not so much a demand upon us, perhaps it is instead an order to life. The way it is. The structure, the beginning and the direction and the destination for the way it is.

Jesus does not so much demand love as he models it. He *infuses* it. He *bestows* it.... Love is the gift. Love is the heart. Love is what is and what becomes and what is perfected, not by us, but by Christ himself. Love sweeps up, both the Lover and the Beloved!

Jesus taught us to love our enemies, to be kind to strangers, to love our neighbors. Do you see a world ever spiraling ever closer and closer?

John wrote in this letter that we are to love one another. And then he wrote so boldly – but without fear – that we are to love our brothers and sisters!

You are not my enemy; we need not fight. You are not a stranger; we do not neglect or ignore or pass by one another. We are brothers and sisters, you and I. We are family. We are bound to one another by flesh and breath and spirit... by Love.

How do we love our neighbors... our brothers and sisters? What does that mean? What does that look like?

Love can be so vague... or so imaginative. It can be almost anything! Today we suggest to you two things it just might be – to love our brothers and sisters.

We could love one another by caring for all human and non-human creatures who experience wildfire smoke.

Secondly, we could love by working to ensure that all people, especially the very young and the very old and those with limited resources, may find sanctuary in extreme heat events, someplace cool to experience friendship, hospitality, relief and rest.

What might that look like?

Barb, do you remember what last summer was like? We had wildfire smoke for months! And we had record high temperatures, with very little relief from rain.

What was that like for you?

[Barb's story]

[My story].

Recently, you and I and Helen heard some disturbing news and some good news. In the spirit of those disciples who ran from the tomb with good news of life and hope, we want to share some good news and invite people to care for their brothers and sisters in two very practical ways.

So, in partnership with the Alberta synod, some other faith communities, and various resources in our community, we are planning a workshop in June to help engage people to prepare for conditions that are expected to be much worse than last year.

We have applied for a grant from the Alberta synod. We are negotiating with resources in public health and emergency services. We are inviting through circles spiralling ever outward, so that hope and wellness may spread even more quickly than fire.

At this workshop we will address Realities, Risks, and Response-abilities.

We'll talk about wildfire itself. The benefits of controlled fire. Bio-diversity and diverse landscapes and what feeds the fire and how we can manage undergrowth and firebreaks to limit the spread of fire. We'll hear about the increasing number of days, the increasing hectares lost, the increasing spread of smoke and chemicals reaching worldwide. The increasing loss of life.

We will have someone from public health describe what we know and are learning about with the short and long-term effects of wildfire smoke on individual health, especially with the young and the old and with those on the margins of society. The impacts on cardiovascular and pulmonary systems. Even reduced cognition functioning. That impacts our schools! We'll talk about the need to reduce exposure, to predict and respond more quickly. And how to plan your indoor and outdoor activities safely

We'll explore developing more resilient communities. And what more we can do in our homes and public spaces.

Practically, we intend to use our grant to acquire materials to assemble twenty-two filter fans. Two large fans can each reduce the smoke particles in the atmosphere of a 1,000 square foot, multi-level home. Twenty small units will be constructed- and given away- to persons in smaller residences, condos and apartments, so they too can reduce the particles in the air, even if they do not have forced air furnaces or air conditioning.

Cleaning the air is one response. But what do we do with the heat? It may not be practical or affordable to add air conditioning to people's homes. And there are only so many fans one can have running. And heat has its own impacts on the body and mind, including isolation. So, we want to explore in our own neighborhood, and encourage other faith communities in their neighborhoods, to work with public spaces to identify places of "sanctuary," cool places where people can go, spend some time, rest, cool off and connect with neighbors – that is, brothers and sisters.

Why would we do this? What does air quality and adaptation under heat have to do with church and faith life? Are these projects as important as food banks and clothing drives?

It's about recognizing need, responding with compassion, and standing by long enough to make a difference. It's called loving God and loving our brothers and sisters.

Theologically it has to do with being one body, one community, an interdependent, interconnected creation.

It's about attending to the Breath. Faith communities are rediscovering the wonder of God the Father being also God the Creator. And the creation is more than what we live in, but also how we live with.

When we speak of the Spirit of God, we are speaking about breath and wind and whisper and sigh.

We breathe into every moment. We breathe into the future. We breathe the same air, the same molecules as our ancestors did... and as our descendants will do. All living things that breathe share the same breath. Breath is life. Breath is of God.

So today we wanted to reflect on the words of our epistle and take seriously the direction of life and Love. We wanted to be specific about what loving our brothers and sisters might look like.

Let this be a teaser, a trailer, like a message in the movies, describing a coming attraction!

We want to extend the invitation- through this live service and through the live streaming now and through our living networks and the archive of this message on our website in the next month- to encourage that the vision and the possibility of being loving brothers and sisters might spread even better than smoke and wildfire.

If you can catch the spark, share the news. If you can smell the possibility of fresh air, be a part of the workshop. We can use your help. We will have the lunch catered, but we will need help serving. We need people who like to build things to assemble these twenty-two fans. And we need hospitable people to identify where it's cool to hang out. And think about being "cool" in many ways.

In closing, I invite you to take a deep breath and be mindful of how you breathe all day, every day, without thinking.

Take a deep breath and be thankful that God and Life and Love can be as close as your breath.

Lastly, take a deep breath and softly say, "YES!"

God be with us.

Amen.