

“By this everyone will know...”

April 28, 2013

Mary R. Brownlow

On April 15, I was with a group of 21 teenagers and 6 other adults, working on a church in eastern North Carolina. That afternoon, we heard news of an explosion in downtown Boston. Like many of you, we reacted with shock, disbelief, worry and grief. We felt both connected to the tragedy and strangely removed. I was reminded of my first church rebuilding work trip in 1999, when, on the Tuesday of that work-week, in the bus taking us from our work site to our living site, we heard the news about the Columbine shootings. “How could this be?” we asked ourselves. In the close-knit community of the work trippers, in our little bubble of work and play, in our intention of serving our sister church communities, the eruption of hate and violence seems so dissonant and foreign.

Last week, at a “circle time” with the youth one morning, I read a paragraph about compassion from the author Karen Armstrong. Then I spoke about how overwhelmed we feel at times by tragedies over which we have no control. What could we do about a bombing in Boston, except to telephone our friends, and pray? But since I could do so little, I suggested that I could focus on what was in front of us that day. In our own small sphere, we could practice compassion, we could love the neighbor and the stranger and even the enemy. We could demonstrate love. In the words of President Obama, ...”we will choose compassion...we’ll choose friendship, we’ll choose love.”

It occurred to me that our faith tradition has given us the perfect tools, in the form of stories and poetry, to enable us to carry on in this way. Recently I read an article from an expert on church organization. He wrote about how stress and fear hinder our “capacity for imagination, action, generosity, creativity, and remembering.” We focus on what we do **not** have, what is gone. But, another approach is “asset-based planning and thinking.” Don’t you love this specialized jargon? What it means is starting with what you already have. What we already have are stories of inclusion and welcome, stories of sacrificial love, and visions of a new heaven and a new earth. What we already have is the example of Jesus, living lovingly in the midst of danger and disaster. During his last hours, he offered “asset-based planning and thinking,” but his words and presence must have felt like a candle in the wind. And yet...here we are, still listening.

The reading from John’s Gospel is part of several chapters set on the last evening Jesus spent with his disciples. The section begins with this moving introduction: “Having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus loved them to the end.” These four chapters are a prolonged farewell. They have shared a meal and Jesus has washed their feet, setting an example of humble service. The few verses read today are sandwiched between two reactions of the disciples. Judas leaves to betray his master. Peter insists that he will lay down his life for Jesus, but, as we know, he too will betray through denial. A state of confusion reigns in this small, intimate group.

Jesus says some mysterious things about glory, his own and God’s. Then he gives the “new” commandment: “love one another as I have loved you.” This will be a living symbol, the sign and evidence that they are truly following their teacher and friend. Though it will tremble at times like a candle in the wind, it will shine out like a beacon in the troubled world.

Many of us wrestle with the idea that we are **commanded** to love. How can you command an emotion? But here we are talking about a spiritual reality: the spirit taking form in action. It has been called “the capacity of the heart willing and acting upon that which is good or generous or lovely.” Jesus named our capacity to will and act, not our more fleeting, or more self-serving emotions. He commanded a way of life, rooted in the love of God, but demonstrated today, here and now.

In the two thousand years since that last supper, Christians have often fallen woefully short in this endeavor. We have not always taken the new commandment as our stamp of identity. We would prefer to be known as Christ’s disciples through missionary zeal, or sermons, or grand buildings, or magnificent celebrations, or special moral standards, or church membership. But here is what we learn from Jesus’ farewell words: start here, start now, turn to the one closest to you, and show love. Maybe, if we can do that much, we can expand the circle, as Peter did in his journeys to Joppa and Caesarea, and find companions with whom to share the Spirit’s gifts.

Buoyed up by the love and support of this congregation, I was able to travel last week to another Christian community. Hyman Chapel AME Zion in Havelock, North Carolina is experiencing a fresh infusion of the Spirit as they seek to love their own members and the wider community. When we arrived and worshipped with them on April 14, we knew they were Christ’s disciples by the way they loved one another. The beautiful thing was the way that love burst out from a small group to include us and other visitors. We felt enveloped and encouraged by that love as we worked on their building and struggled with the daily news. With the folks at Hyman Chapel, we chose compassion, we chose friendship, we chose love.

We have heard how Deb Van Arman’s family has been buoyed up by the love and support of this congregation. Over the years, these moments shine like a candle in the darkness, and we know: they chose compassion, they chose friendship, they chose love.

I invite you to recall a time in the last week or so that you chose love. Maybe you put your own wants to one side in order to serve another; maybe you supported a colleague, maybe you forgave a friend. Maybe it was a dramatic action; maybe it was a small gesture. But I suspect that each of us did in fact “love one another,” and it is good to acknowledge that.

I also invite you to recall a time in the last week or so when you found it difficult to love. Maybe it was just too hard to forgive our neighbor, or to move beyond disappointment; maybe the crime was just too heinous for an easy absolution. I suspect that each of us was challenged and tested by the inability to act lovingly, and it is good to acknowledge that.

The reality is that we do love, often, and we do fail to love, often. Luckily, we have a church family to turn to, a place where we can celebrate the one and pray about the other. This is a place where we can find meaning in both our successes and our failures. Scripture gives us a special awareness and a special intentionality about loving in difficult times. In this season of resurrection joy following Easter, we can tune ourselves to harmony with Jesus’ love for his friends. We can in fact be included in his resurrected life through this. Our bodies are as frail as ever, but our spirits soar to live in the glorious New Jerusalem. In some mystical way, we come to know in our bones that the home of God is among mortals, and God dwells in the connections made between us. By this everyone will know that we follow the risen Christ.

I want to share with you a letter that Katy Gerke has written to our congregation. This is a dark time for Katy and Paul, but you will see the light shining through her words:

*Dear friends from Norwich Congregational Church,*

*I cannot thank you enough for the immensely kind and supportive care you have extended to Paul and me throughout the long ordeal of my lymphoma. Truly, I had never imagined that I could feel such caring outside the circle of our very close family. But the palpable love I feel coming from all of you has moved me, cheered me, buoyed me up so much that I feel different – truly different. I do not feel alone, and I do not feel afraid, with all of you behind me.*

*Your gift recording of hymns that I love moved me deeply. Each is special to me. My father, when I was a child, taught a Sunday School series on the saints mentioned in “I sing a Song of the Saints of God,” so I love that one particularly (just so you know, Barbara Duncan and Gary Brooks find this hymn particularly risible...there is wondrous diversity in the world...). And as my father was a naval officer for most of my childhood, “Eternal Father, Strong to Save,” the naval hymn, is of special meaning to me. Who can resist the power of “God is Working His Purpose Out”? I truly “Want to Walk as a Child of the Light,” but find it’s more difficult than it sounds. Paul and I listened to these hymns of significance to me together, and we cried. Thank you so much for this special gift.*

*And Hillary told us of the prayers you have lifted up as a congregation for me and Paul. I cannot express adequately how safe and supported and cheered this makes me. Your aggregate kindnesses, expressed in so many different ways over the last year, with food and visits and flowers and prayers and e-mails and jokes and books, have helped to keep us going.*

*I surely hope I will recover from this disease. Paul and I have many things to do, and many will involve the privilege of sharing your company. If I don’t recover, I know that I will be (as I am now) in the hands of God, who numbers my days, right? And I will be in the presence of the saints, and all our loved ones who have passed on before. This transition happens to everyone. So all will be well. Thank you for helping us through all this so powerfully, and with such kindness. It has meant everything.*

*Love, Katy and Paul*

I close with a few lines of prayer from Wendell Berry:

I know that I have life  
only insofar as I have love.  
I have no love  
except it come from Thee.  
Help me, please, to carry  
this candle against the wind.

Amen.