

Dignity Northern Virginia

By Kathleen Blank Reither

May 16, 2020

This Sunday's Gospel (see following) continues Jesus's long farewell to his disciples the night before he died, the beginning of which we heard in last Sunday's Gospel. Whether you believe that Jesus literally spoke every word of John's four-chapter discourse, it's abundantly clear that that night and multiple times throughout his ministry, Jesus poured out his heart and soul to his disciples to communicate the truth of who he is. And in both of these Gospels his words speak directly and powerfully to us all as we live with the fear, uncertainty, and terrible tragedies of a global pandemic.

On this night before his death, Jesus reminds his disciples of all he wants them to remember as the coming horrendous events unfold. First, he tells them not to let their hearts be troubled, that they can believe in him, because he is in God and God is in him, and that through their faith in him they will do the same and even greater works than he has done. In today's Gospel, he says, ***if you love me do as I command, and I will ask Abba God to send you the Spirit to be with you always.*** What command? Three times during this discourse Jesus says, "This is my command... Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." Then and now Jesus tells his disciples that nothing is more important than that we love each other as he loves us. And we know from the way he lived that his love includes everyone without exception.

So the question I asked myself this week is how are these teachings of Jesus – don't let your heart be troubled, I will send my Spirit to be with you always, and Love one another

as I have loved you – shaping our response as people of faith to the times we’re living through. Of course, there’s the obvious – Jesus’s command to love means that besides taking care of our own immediate safety and well-being, we must also extend ourselves to respond to the needs of those who need our help. How we are called to extend ourselves and to whom will be different for each of us, according to our circumstances.

But there’s something else about this “love one another as I have loved you” business that I’ve needed to look at squarely. I don’t know about you, but I’ve been listening to a lot of news these days (maybe too much) – news filled with graphic reminders of the heavy, heavy toll this pandemic is taking. Every day we hear more about the economic devastation to millions of families, hundreds of millions facing food insecurity globally, tremendous loss of life among nursing home residents, insufficiently protected health care workers, unsafe conditions for meat plant workers, animals cruelly slaughtered because the market is glutted...and many more tragic situations unfolding in the world right now.

I confess that my response to these tragedies ranges from resentment, to anger to rage – especially when it seems relatively easy to identify which individuals or groups are to blame for the pain and suffering. No matter where you are on the political spectrum – whether you believe states have been shut down too long or are reopening too early, whether you believe government isn’t doing enough or really can’t afford to do more to help our financially desperate citizens, whether you believe requiring people to wear masks is a violation of civil liberties or that refusing to wear a face mask is selfish and

socially irresponsible – recent events have likely triggered a lot of unloving feelings and behaviors in most of us and definitely in me. But lately, each time I regard with contempt those I feel are to blame for the suffering, I'm remembering that at every Eucharist, I commit myself with all present to do as Jesus commanded – to love everyone as he loves us. So, this week my question became, "What can I do to let Christ's love take deeper root in me towards those I blame for the suffering of others? In other words, how do I start to love those I really don't love, as Christ loves them?"

It's interesting and truly wonderful how the Spirit – the helper and counselor Jesus promised to send in today's Gospel – shows up with answers to my questions. While doing some reading for a course this week, I came across this Buddhist prayer practice for cultivating compassion called Metta, or lovingkindness. You practice directing compassion and lovingkindness in turn – first toward yourself, then to someone you love deeply, then to a person toward whom your feelings are neutral, and then to someone you dislike or regard as an enemy – by reciting these four phrases:

"May you be filled with lovingkindness.

May you be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May you be well in body and mind.

May you be at ease and happy."

Even if expressing these kind thoughts toward yourself, or especially toward someone you dislike, feels completely mechanical, do it any way — and ask that any resistance or angry feelings that arise in you as you say this prayer be transformed.* For what it's

worth, practicing Metta is awakening glimmers of compassion in my heart for certain national leaders for whom I have had no kind thoughts whatsoever. It's kind of amazing. I've begun to realize that the Spirit led me to the practice of Metta as a very concrete way to live Jesus's teaching: "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44)

In commanding us to "Love one another as I have loved you," it seems that Jesus was asking the impossible. But loving as he loved is possible, because he sent his Spirit to live in us and to help us by showing us the way.

*See below. For a one-page background and details on the Metta prayer, see "Meditation on Lovingkindness" at <https://jackkornfield.com/meditation-on-lovingkindness/>

May I be filled with lovingkindness

"I am larger, better than I thought; I did not know I held so much goodness."
– Walt Whitman

This meditation uses words, images, and feelings to evoke a lovingkindness and friendliness toward oneself and others. With each recitation of the phrases, we are expressing an intention, planting the seeds of loving wishes over and over in our heart.

With a loving heart as the background, all that we attempt, all that we encounter will open and flow more easily. You can begin the practice of lovingkindness by meditating for fifteen or twenty minutes in a quiet place. Let yourself sit in a comfortable fashion. Let your body rest and be relaxed. Let your heart be soft. Let go of any plans or preoccupations.

Begin with yourself. Breathe gently and recite inwardly the following traditional phrases directed toward your own well-being. You begin with yourself because without loving yourself it is difficult to love others.

May I be filled with lovingkindness.

May I be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May I be well in body and mind.

May I be at ease and happy.

As you repeat these phrases, picture yourself as you are now, and hold that image in a heart of lovingkindness. Or perhaps you will find it easier to picture yourself as a young and beloved child. Adjust the words and images in any way you wish. Create the exact phrases that best open your heart of kindness.

Repeat these phrases over and over again, letting the feelings permeate your body and mind. Practice this meditation for a number of weeks, until the sense of lovingkindness for yourself grows.

Be aware that this meditation may at times feel mechanical or awkward. It can also bring up feelings contrary to lovingkindness, feelings of irritation and anger. If this happens, it is especially important to be patient and kind toward yourself, allowing whatever arises to be received in a spirit of friendliness and kind affection.

When you feel you have established some stronger sense of lovingkindness for yourself, you can then expand your meditation to include others. After focusing on yourself for five or ten minutes, choose a benefactor, someone in your life who has loved and truly cared for you. Picture this person and carefully recite the same phrases:

*May you be filled with lovingkindness.
May you be safe from inner and outer dangers.
May you be well in body and mind.
May you be at ease and happy.*

Let the image and feelings you have for your benefactor support the meditation. Whether the image or feelings are clear or not does not matter. In meditation they will be subject to change. Simply continue to plant the seeds of loving wishes, repeating the phrases gently no matter what arises.

Expressing gratitude to our benefactors is a natural form of love. In fact, some people find lovingkindness for themselves so hard, they begin their practice with a benefactor. This too is fine. The rule in lovingkindness practice is to follow the way that most easily opens your heart.

When lovingkindness for your benefactor has developed, you can gradually begin to include other people in your meditation. Picturing each beloved person, recite inwardly the same phrases, evoking a sense of lovingkindness for each person in turn. After this you can include others: Spend some time wishing well to a wider circle of friends. Then gradually extend your meditation to picture and include community members, neighbors, people everywhere, animals, all beings, the whole earth.

Finally, include the difficult people in your life, even your enemies, wishing that they too may be filled with lovingkindness and peace. This will take practice. But as your heart opens, first to loved ones and friends, you will find that in the end you won't want to close it anymore.

Lovingkindness can be practiced anywhere. You can use this meditation in traffic jams, in buses, and on airplanes. As you silently practice this meditation among people, you will come to feel a wonderful connection with them – the power of lovingkindness. It will calm your mind and keep you connected to your heart.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

(May 17, 2020)

Gospel Reading: John 14:15-21

Jesus said to the disciples,

15 "If you love me
and obey the command I give you,

16 I will ask the One who sent me
to give you another Paraclete, another Helper
to be with you always —

17 The Spirit of truth,
whom the world cannot accept
since the world neither sees nor recognizes the Spirit
but you can recognize the Spirit
because the Spirit remains with you
and will be within you.

18 I will not leave you orphaned;
I will come back to you.

19 A little while now and the world will see me no more;
but you will see me;
because I live,
and you will live as well.

20 On that day you will know
that I am in God,
and you are in me,
and I am in you.

21 Those who obey the commandments
are the ones who love me,
and those who love me
will be loved by Abba God.
I, too, will love them
and will reveal myself to them."

*Taken from Cycle A Inclusive Lectionary Texts
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