

THE RHYTHM OF LIFE

Nurturing Life

A prompting offered by Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
May 9-10, 2009 • Fifth Sunday of Easter (Mother's Day)
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

1 John 4:7-21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

1 John 4:18

Have you ever wondered about the history of Mother's Day? Each Mother's Day I am drawn to its history, and somehow, in some way, I love to repeat it. On Mother's Day, I always feel compelled to tell the history of Mother's Day so that the day is not lost in sentimentality and sappiness.

Now don't get me wrong. I love to honor and recognize my mother on Mother's Day. There is no finer mother on the planet than my mom and it is important for me to tell her so. It is a good thing to celebrate our mothers, or those persons, whoever they may be, female or male, who are like, or have been, a mother to us. I did just that this past Friday evening by going to Columbus and taking my mother and my father out to dinner. I feel so blessed and pleased to have the opportunity to celebrate my mother whenever I get the chance...and Mother's Day certainly offers us that opportunity!

But there is more to the story of Mother's Day than Hallmark and bouquets of flowers may let on. Did you know that Mother's Day was founded as a movement of peace and global concern? Jonathan Klute reminds us that:

Julia Ward Howe offered her Mother's Day Proclamation to the world in 1870. Her dream was the establishment of an international Mothers' Day Festival dedicated to the cause of nonviolent resolution of conflict and international solidarity among all women. Her pacifist consciousness had been provoked by the bloodshed of the Franco-Prussian War. Her activism was cultivated in the struggles for abolition of slavery and the quest for women's suffrage. She had the proclamation translated into French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Swedish, working for the establishment of Mother's Day in concert with women internationally celebrating peace and women's empowerment.

Howe died in 1910, four years before President Woodrow Wilson officially declared the day in 1914 in response to the burgeoning success of the movement she inspired. But Wilson avoided any mention of the thrust of Howe's cause in his declaration, instead emphasizing only the nurturing "home and hearth" dimension of motherhood. He also spurned the internationalist concern that was central to Howe's consciousness, distorting this into American nationalism. Howe's central concerns, the universality of motherhood and its natural expression in anti-war sentiment, was excised from the official meaning of the day.

President Wilson proclaimed: "Now, therefore, I, Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the said Joint Resolution, do hereby direct the government officials to display the United States flag on all government buildings and do invite the people of the United States to display the flag at their homes or other suitable places on the second Sunday in May as a public expression of our love and reverence for the mothers of our country."

Compare this to Howe's far more high minded vision, still so desperately needed in this suffering divided world. Here is the text of her 1870 Mother's Day Proclamation, so prescient in its understanding, so courageous in its call, so plaintiff in its currency nearly a century and a half later.

*Arise then...women of this day!
Arise, all women who have hearts!
Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!
Say firmly:
"We will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies,
Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage,
For caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.
We, the women of one country,
Will be too tender of those of another country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."*

*From the voice of a devastated Earth a voice goes up with
Our own. It says: "Disarm! Disarm!
The sword of murder is not the balance of justice."
Blood does not wipe our dishonor,
Nor violence indicate possession.
As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil
At the summons of war,
Let women now leave all that may be left of home
For a great and earnest day of counsel.
Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.
Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means
Whereby the great human family can live in peace...
Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar,
But of God -
In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask
That a general congress of women without limit of nationality,
May be appointed and held at someplace deemed most convenient
And the earliest period consistent with its objects,
To promote the alliance of the different nationalities,*

*The amicable settlement of international questions,
The great and general interests of peace.*
(from www.spiritualprogressives.org, May 8, 2009)

I repeat this history today to deepen and expand our celebration of Mother's Day. I also tell that story to help us reclaim an often unknown, often belittled and/or deliberately ignored side of our Christian tradition that grounds our Christian spirituality and practice in love, peace and justice in an effort to be followers of Jesus, the son of Mary, our Christ. I feel compelled to lift up "the other side of the story" on this Mother's Day, especially in light of a recent Pew Research Center's survey that showed in America that a high percentage of Christians are supportive of torture. And instead of me trying to summarize these findings for you, I invite you to listen to a Leonard Pitts commentary on these findings that was offered in the Dayton Daily News this past week. I hope you will forgive me, but I am going to read the commentary in its entirety. With an economy of words, and with articulate and engaging prose, Pitts get to the heart of the matter:

Between 1933 and 1945, as a series of restrictive laws, brutal pogroms and mass deportations culminated in the slaughter of 6 million Jews, the Christian church, with isolated exceptions, watched in silence.

Between 1955 and 1968, as the forces of oppression used terrorists bombings, police violence and kangaroo courts to deny African-Americans their freedom, the Christian church, with isolated exceptions, watched in silence.

Beginning in 1980, as mysterious and deadly new disease called AIDS began to rage through the homosexual community like an unchecked fire, the Christian church, with isolated exceptions, watched in silence.

So who can be surprised by the new Pew report?

Specifically, it's from the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, and it surveys Americans attitudes on the torture of suspected terrorists. Pew found that 49 percent of the nation believes torture is at least sometimes justifiable. Slice that number by religious affiliation, though, and things get interesting. It turns out the religiously unaffiliated are the "least" likely (40 percent) to support torture, but that the more you attend church, the more likely you are to condone it. Among racial/religious groups, white evangelical Protestants were far and away the most likely (62 percent) to support inflicting pain as a tool of interrogation.

You'd think people who claim connection to a higher morality would be the ones most likely to take the lonely, principled stand. But you need only look at history to see how seldom that has been the case, how frequently my people – Christians – acquiesce to expediency and fail to look beyond the immediate. Never mind that looking beyond the immediate pretty much constitutes a Christian's entire job description.

In the Bible it says, "Perfect love casts out fear." What we see so often in people of faith, though, is an imperfect love that embraces fear, that lets us live contentedly in our moral comfort zones, doing spiritual busywork and clucking pieties, things that let you feel good, but never require you to put anything at risk, take a leap, make that lonely stand.

Again, there are exceptions, but they prove the rule, which is that in our smug belief that God is on our side, we often fail to ask if we are on His.

So it is often left to a few iconoclasts – Oscar Schindler, the war profiteer who rescued 1,200 Jews in Poland; James Reeb, the Unitarian Universalist minister murdered for African-American voting rights in Alabama; Princess Diana, the British royal who courted international opprobrium for simply touching a person with AIDS in Britain – to do the dangerous and moral thing while the great body of Christendom watches in silence.

Now there is this debate over the morality of torture in which putative people of faith say they can live with a little blood (someone else's) and a little pain (also someone else's) if it helps maintain the illusion of security (theirs), and never mind such niceties as guilt or innocence. Thus it was left to Jon Stewart, the cheerfully irreligious host of "The Daily Show," to speak last week of the need to be willingly bound by rules of decency and civilization or else be indistinguishable from

the terrorists. "I understand the impulse," he said. "I wanted them to clone bin Laden so that we could kill one a year at half-time at the Super Bowl. ... I understand bloodlust, I understand revenge; I understand all those feelings. I also understand that this country is better than me."

So there you have it: a statement of principle and higher morality from a late-night comic. That Christians are not lining up to say the same is glaringly ironic in light of what happened to a Middle Eastern man who was arrested by the government, imprisoned and tortured. Eventually he was even executed, though he was innocent of any crime.

His name was Jesus.

(Leonard Pitts, Jr., "When It Comes to Torture, Many Christians Take Unchristian View," Dayton Daily News, May 5, 2009)

Amen, brother Pitts! Amen!

So let me be clear: as a Christian and as a pastor I declare this Mother's Day, in the Christian tradition of Julia Ward Howe, that torture is wrong. It is criminal. It perpetuates violence and does not make us safer. If anything, it makes us less safe. Torture demeans and mocks our higher ideals not only as Christians, but as Americans. In addition, torture does not pass the smell test of the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as they would do to you" nor the Great Commandment to "Love our neighbors as ourselves." Quite frankly, I am embarrassed and deeply ashamed that the acceptability of torture is even a question for so many of our political leaders, and for so many of my fellow Christians.

I just love it when our biblical reading for worship is quoted in the public arena during the week prior. Did you catch it? Leonard Pitts quoted from the epistle of 1 John 4: "Perfect love casts out fear." This is one of my favorite of all favorite passages in all the sacred scriptures because it cuts to the heart of what our Christian faith and our discipleship grounded in Jesus is all about: It is about love – God's love for us and everybody else and our grateful response to show forth that love through our lives.

But you and I know that as Christians, both collectively and individually, we often fail to live up to our highest ideal. And yes, I think 1 John gets to the heart of why we fail to receive and give love as we are meant. It is also summed up in one word: Fear. As Thomas Merton noted "Fear narrows the little entrance of our heart. It shrinks up our capacity to love. It freezes up our power to give ourselves." There is certainly too much fear in us and among us. And Pitts is dead on: "What we see so often in people of faith, though, is an imperfect love that embraces fear that lets us live contentedly in our moral comfort zones, doing spiritual busywork and clucking pieties, things that let you feel good, but never require you to put anything at risk, take a leap, make that lonely stand."

But I think the problem is also deeper than fear. The problem is rooted more deeply in how we tell our story as Christians and how we make meaning from our relationship to the one we name as our Christ – Jesus of Nazareth. A couple of weeks ago I was privileged to hear Diana Butler Bass speak at the Alliance of Baptists National Convocation in Charlotte, NC. Diana is an expert in Christian history and has made a name for herself studying and analyzing vital and energized churches who live a more progressive and inclusive Christian faith. She documented these studies in a delightful book called *A CHRISTIANITY FOR THE REST OF US*.

Now, she is out with a new book called *A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY*. Did you notice in Leonard Pitt's commentary he kept writing that "with isolated exceptions" the church was basically silent at best and complicit at worst to some awful horrors and injustice? Well, Diana's book is trying to tell the stories of those "isolated exceptions." She makes a good case that Christians have basically been told, and largely shaped by what she calls "Big-C" Christianity – Christ, Constantine, Christendom, Calvin, and Christian America. She says, though, that Christians really only have vague notions of what happened after Jesus. If I were to give you a pop quiz today and ask you to construct a simple historical outline of Christianity after Jesus, what would you include? My guess is probably not much. The truth is we just don't know much about how the Church evolved into its current messiness.

For "Big-C" Christianity, the Bible verse that undergirds this perspective is "Go ye therefore into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them in the name the father, son and holy spirit." This verse is often referred to as the Great Commission and it is used by many churches to fuel their missionary efforts to save the world from hell and give them heaven through Jesus *alone*. And friends, there have been all kinds of shameful things done to peoples and cultures across the globe when Christian missionaries

showed up to convert them, sometimes by force and blood. The hymn for this perspective is "Onward Christian Soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus, going on before! Christ, the royal Master, leads us against the foe; forward into battle, see His banner go!"

Do you notice and hear the words of triumphalism, and militarism; the words of conquest and winning; the arrogance and certainty? Have no wonder that so many Christians today feel comfortable with torture!

But here's the good news. That is not the only story of Christianity. Just like the story of Mother's Day, just like the issue of torture, there is this "other side of the story."

There are these "isolated exceptions" when Christians have shown, and continue to show forth, love and justice and have nurtured abundant life for all, especially for the last and least. Bass says that the bible verse for this perspective is "Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and love your neighbor as yourself." This verse is often referred to as the Great Commandment.

She makes an important note that the Great Commission, the "Go ye therefore and make disciples" is found in a section of Matthew's gospel where few scholars think these are the actual words of Jesus. These words tend to reflect the early Christians thoughts about Jesus and their faith in Jesus after his death. But the words of the Great Commandment, the "Love God with all your heart...and your neighbor as yourself" are seen across biblical scholarship as essential words of the historical Jesus. So doesn't it make more sense to lodge our deepest commitment to Jesus in his own words and life? Or at least try to start there? You decide. Which is more compelling; "Go and make disciples" or "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself"?

Bass suggests that the hymn for this "other side of the story" Christianity is the delightful Easter song "Now the Green Blade Rises from the buried grain; Wheat that in dark earth for many days has lain; Love lives again, that with the dead has been: love is come again like wheat that rises green; When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain, Christ's warm touch can call us back to life again, fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been: Love is come again like wheat that rises green." Can you hear the difference in the songs, can you envision the two different worlds they help us imagine? Can you see why it matters to know what story, what history undergirds our faith, what story undergirds our life together?

Diana Butler Bass went on to say that many people have been talking of late about "red" churches and "blue" churches. And some folks are so bothered by such an overt political designation for churches that they are calling for "purple" churches. However, Bass said she is calling for "green" churches...just like the hymn NOW THE GREEN BLADE RISES calls forth: "love has come again like wheat that rises green." I think she is right. She is calling this a generative Christianity. The word generative is rooted in the color green. The word generative calls forth a faith that nurtures life; a faith that helps us live and tap into the well-spring of life; a faith that calls us outside of ourselves to help other people live and also tap into that same well-spring of life.

Here's my point: I want to be a Christian and belong to a Christian community that is about the business of nurturing life in all its fullness...not just for some folks, but all folks. I want to belong to a Christianity that nurtures love and hope and peace and justice against the backdrop of so much death, and violence, and fear, and hate, and despair, and oppression. As a Christian, I want to stand on the side of life. I want to join the dance, and invite others to join the dance too...this dance to the rhythm of life. And if that means I (or we) find ourselves in the category of "isolated exceptions," THEN SO BE IT.