



Sermon for the Eighth Sunday of Pentecost Season, August 2020

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

Exodus 12:1-14

Romans 13: 8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

Welcome, everybody!

Welcome to St. Luke's in the park – St. Luke's on the move.

It's great to see everyone once again.

Here we are – about to start a new year of school and other programs, about to kick the Fall season into swing. We're looking down the pike into the channel of an oncoming new program year. And we look down this channel with a lot of uncertainty, but also with as much resolve as we can muster.

All sorts of questions face us. How will school play out this year for our children? How will college work out for our young adults? How will health balance with employment? When will cases begin to drop again in Kootenai County and across the region?

The health concerns that run deep due to the COVID-19 pandemic are no small, petty concerns. They affect so many facets of our lives. And the intermittent precautionary preventions we have – increased attention to hygiene, using masks, and minimizing close sustained interactions – seem so small compared to what we would like to do. Give us something to build! Give us all a specific task – something to DO, not something to stop doing! The precautions and preventions run against our very American desire to get busy and fix it now, and the strange stillness and solitude allows space for us to get anxious, go a bit stir-crazy, and feel uncertain about where to put our energies. Add this to the stresses and concerns of a nation facing continuing challenges of racial injustices, in an election year that has high stakes – and of an economy that has been profoundly affected by this pandemic – and the level of uncertainty can seem way too thick.

Anxious uncertainty is draining for all of us. And we need each other. We need love, to sustain us and carry us through.

And we need humor. A church musician sent out an update letter to friends and family, noting the challenges of this time for everyone, and then offering a series of jokes to lighten everyone's spirits. Let me share a few with you. A warning – these are along the lines of the humor known as "Dad jokes" that are particular favorites of my youngest. So, I'm expecting some groans.

- What did the duck say when she bought a lipstick? "Put in on my bill!"
- I hate Russian dolls. They're just so full of themselves.

- Why did the can crusher quit his job? Because it was soda pressing... So-Da Pressing?
- I just went to an emotional wedding. Even the cake was in tiers. In tiers!
- What did Batman say to Robin before they got in the car? "Robin, get in the car."

That last one was thanks to Jordan, my youngest, who found it on the internet.

One gift we bring each other – and can bring ourselves – is humor, mirth, a bit of joyful silliness. We need to laugh. We need the healing lift of fun – not fun at the expense of someone else, but fun in the sense of seeing the humor there is in life itself. After all, we are all funny creatures, no matter what age we are. Life is full of funny twists and turns. And humor can be good medicine that helps change our perspective and loosen us up.

Martin Luther said, "The Gospel is nothing less than laughter and joy." One of my old mentors was fond of relating some wisdom from Martin Luther. Martin as a reformer of the Church wrestled with deep internal and external challenges, and sensed them as spiritual tormentors. He found strength in laughter and joy, and even in mocking himself and the demonic forces he sensed pressing in on him. In his *Table Talk*, Luther said, "The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to texts of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn."

Friends in Christ the Risen One – let's laugh, let's find joy with each other.

After service, before you leave, tell someone a joke or share a funny story. Let laughter be one of the gifts we offer each other today.

But healthy humor is only one piece of the medicine of loving connection with others. We need to remember, for many it is not easy to find joy and laughter in these days. The families of those shot in the streets and in their homes are not laughing. In some cases, they are not even weeping. As the sister of Jacob Blake said, "I have not shed a tear. All my tears are spent, from years of watching my people shot."

She said, "I don't want your pity. I want change."

When someone says, "Help me," that is a call to us to get up and do something. To act. Not to argue. Not to pity. To act.

Love is more than sentiment. Love is more than warm feelings shared and given. Love is action. Love is a verb with a capital V. As Paul puts it in Romans, love is THE verb for followers of Jesus. It is THE way of life for us, and it shapes everything we think and say and do.

To love means to act. When we see someone signaling for help on the road, holding a gas can or standing in front of a blown out tire, how many of us have stopped? When we have seen a fight or confrontation between people where there is unkindness being spewed, how many of us have

stepped in to calm things down? If someone falls down on the sidewalk, how many of us help someone up?

The cry of the people of Israel, enslaved in Egypt, thousands of years ago, was a cry for help – not for pity, but for help. For deliverance. For rescue. After years of suffering the whips and chains of slavery, and the death-order of Pharaoh to slaughter baby boys in order to control their population and the threat of their rising strength as a people, they gathered around Moses who brought God's promise of strong deliverance and rescue. And the God of gods, the Lord, brought awakening afflictions on the Egyptians, until their pain was enough that they also groaned for release. Sadly, there are those who stubbornly hold on to their positions, their stances, their own sense of rightness, their power – and refuse to change until loss comes close enough that it costs them directly. Pharaoh was self-absorbed enough that he needed to lose something dear and close to him in order for his heart to move – and even then, not because of love but because of grief and rage.

Pray, friends in Christ – pray that we don't get so sucked into our own self-assured stances and beliefs, our own self-absorptions, to the point that we fail to see and hear the cries of "Help me" that are all around us. Pray that we move to act out of open and daring love, and not out of grudging resentment or out of guilt. Pray that we dare to act. Pray that we follow Christ Jesus' bold way of love – to proclaim and seek freedom for those who are in any kind of prison in their lives, to proclaim and help bring sight to those who are blind, to set free those who are oppressed.

Friends, Love is Action. In the uncertainty of these days and weeks and months ahead, we need love – and we need to love. Not just in the sharing of warm feelings. In acts of giving and receiving that make a difference in people's lives. As Paul said in Romans, "Now is the time to wake from sleep."

So, today, friends, decide where you will act in love. Is there someone in your life who is in a bad situation? What will you do, this week, to help them? Are there families who are struggling to eat, pay rent, make ends meet? What will you do, this week, to step into – and step up – the helping efforts of this community? What will you do, this week, to love your neighbors as much as yourselves?

Jesus' primary call is for us to love God, love one another, and love our neighbors as much as ourselves.

From today's Gospel reading, we see a form of love that is about truth-telling and truth-receiving.

So, Jesus' great command to love includes loving others enough to tell the truth to each other and to hear the truth from others. It includes loving others enough to forgive. It includes loving others enough to join hearts together in common prayer and purpose.

Love in speech with one another means loving each other enough to know and declare the truth. It means sometimes saying the hard things. It means confronting when someone has done wrong. It means finding your way through conflict, not by avoiding it, but by facing it honestly and directly with someone – and with others' help when that is needed. It means holding discipline and consistent

expectations as a community, for how we act and speak with one another. On the receiving side, it means recognizing that we are accountable for our actions and speech and attitudes. We belong to something larger than ourselves. And, if we become so self-absorbed that, like Pharaoh, we harden our hearts even before the whole community, then we set ourselves outside the community. Imagine if we handled conflict this directly, in a spirit of love that holds truth at its core.

Now, it's interesting what Jesus has to say about the last stage of conflict. If someone can't be moved by the whole community of faith together, then that person is to be regarded as a tax collector and a Gentile. But...who in the end is the Gospel for? Who does Jesus seek out? Who does the Good News come to? This reading is from the Gospel of Matthew – Matthew, who was a tax collector, whom Jesus sought out! This Gospel is for everyone. So, even though the faith community may change its relationship with someone who refuses to change, the doors remain open, and we continue in relationships of caring outreach to that person. The doors are never shut.

Love means speaking the truth. With whom in your life, even in this faith community (where you can practice), is there conflict or disagreement? Who will you approach for conversation in this next week?

Friends, let us love. Let us be known as Christians for this – for Love.

It is no small order. It is no simple thing.

But let us offer humor and mirth. Let us step up and act to help and deliver others. Let us speak the truth in love.

Even as the pandemic continues to shape our lives, even as we continue as a society to wrestle with the inheritances of sin that have left us with systems and patterns of deep racial injustice, even as we ride the waves of our anxious society hurtling toward an election –

We are to love. Love.

And, in this time, we can call upon God to act. God will save – God will deliver – God will redeem.

May it be so.

“Robin, get in the car!”