

Message for Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017
Glennon Heights Mennonite Church
Betsy Headrick McCrae
Scripture passages: Matthew 28:1-10 and John 1:1-5

The love of God

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

From the very beginning our community-oriented triune God – Source, Word and Spirit; Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost – has loved the world in all its marvelousness and all its pain. God’s love for us and the world is not a love that comes from far away or is held at arms’ length. God’s love is active and involved. So involved that at a specific moment in time, God literally moved into our neighborhood (to quote Clarence Jordan). “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” In Galilee. In a family. In a society. Among people who were trying to know and follow God. Among people much like us.

The Word, who was God and was with God, took on human form – a man named Jesus, who was born as a baby, who lived a human life, had normal human relationships, and dealt with joys and sorrows. In him, through him – this fragile human being like us – we see God and God’s deep love for humanity and the world, revealed to us in ways to which we can relate. In Jesus, through Jesus, God says to us, “Look, I am so very near to you. I am with you and I know you. I understand you deeply and completely. I want you to know that my love for you and the world cannot be shaken. There is nothing that will ever separate you from my love.”

That is clearly the message for this Easter morning, underlined and in capital letters. NOTHING CAN EVER SEPARATE US FROM GOD'S LOVE. Jesus, who suffered and was killed, who was dead and buried, has been raised! God's love cannot be kept down even by death! Alleluia! But there's even more to it than that. What we see in Jesus is that God's love encompasses and embraces even pain and death, yes, even pain and death. Franciscan Richard Rohr explains:

“Jesus shows us that the pattern of everything is death and resurrection. Jesus is the archetypal pattern for every life, including yours and mine. There will be suffering and death along with love, joy and resurrection. Most of us are so resistant to accepting suffering that Jesus walked through it himself and said, ‘Follow me.’ He showed us that on the other side of suffering is transformation. The full, vibrant life that Jesus offers is big enough to include even its opposite: death.”

Listen to that last sentence again: The full, vibrant life that Jesus offers is big enough to include even its opposite: death. Take a moment to allow that to sink in.

pause

Seminary professor Greg Carey says it this way:

“If we take incarnation seriously [God moving into the neighborhood], Jesus’ death reveals that God has taken the fullness of our human situation into God’s own being. Through Jesus, God has taken the weight of human suffering, even our capacity to inflict enormous pain upon one another, and God has brought these awful realities into the core of God’s very own self. God has taken sides with us in our plight, and in doing so God has experienced the awful consequences of human evil. In Jesus’ death God has drawn close to us in the fate we all share.” Professor Cary goes on to say, “Together the

cross and the resurrection bring God's love and power into communion with our mortality and our corruption, transforming death into life, and changing everything for all of us." How utterly amazing. Thanks be to God.

Yesterday in Hesston, Kansas, folks gathered to grieve and to remember the life of Michael J. Sharp. MJ, as he was known, worked in the Democratic Republic of the Congo among warring factions trying to bring about peace. He did this work with the Mennonite Central Committee and most recently with the United Nations. In order to be able to do this work, he moved into the neighborhood. MJ regularly walked miles into the deep forests of eastern Congo to the militia camps. There he spent time with people, searching for common interests, finding out what their needs were and talking with them about how these needs might be met.

"Generally you talk about some basic truths," he once said. "It is not fun to live in the forest. They are malnourished. Even if you are an armed group, and you can be pretty powerful armed group, you might have a bunch of enemy armed groups around you. And that is not fun."

Many of the armed groups MJ spoke with were refugees from Rwanda. They had their children with them in the forest. One of the most powerful truths that got through was that if they got their wish and eventually made it back to Rwanda, their children would be uneducated and at a huge economic disadvantage. Repatriating them back to Rwanda now to get their children an education and a better life was an offer that worked. It is estimated that there are 1,600 fewer militia members due to MJ's commitment to this work.

MJ's work with the U.N. involved tracking how militia groups were being supported with finances and weapons. With his research, the U.N. could consider placing sanctions on people breaking international law by supporting these groups. To do this work MJ had to leave the eastern part of the country, where he was known and trusted, to go to Kasai in the center of the county, where he was more unknown. He never came back. Like Jesus, MJ died a cruel and violent death.

The parallels are many but MJ would be the first to object, I believe, if we focus on the horror of his death and hold him up as a singular paragon of virtue, as somehow being more Christ-like than others. That's not what it's all about, he would say. I am one person, but there are many – perhaps millions – who have suffered and died, and who continue to suffer and die in the Congo. There are many who are unsung heroes in this struggle to survive. All these folks are known and loved by God and their families. They are all human beings who deserve to live a life of safety and enough. That was the purpose of my work. That is the purpose of God's work. That is where God is present and is longing, yearning, for transformation. To use the words of Greg Carey, the awful realities of life in the Congo are carried in the core of God's very own self.

Now that MJ is gone, it is the hope of his family that the work in the Congo he was passionate about will not end. They hope the U.N. will continue its presence in the Congo and that the United States will continue to pay dues to the U.N.

"We are called to love our enemies and to work for justice, on the personal level and on the corporate level," says Michelle Hershberger, Bible Professor at Hesston College and friend of the Sharp family. "Even if that means we die. The way that we defeat evil is by being willing to even give up our lives. That kind of love, that immense

love is what conquers evil. So it is my hope that MJ's love for the Congolese people, demonstrated in the gift of actually giving his life, will be the catalyst for bringing true and lasting peace."

Resurrection is not a one-time miracle to be proven; it is a manifestation of the wholeness that we are all meant to experience, here and now as well as through eternity. On that first Easter morning, the angel and then Jesus himself told Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to tell the others to go to Galilee. There they would see Jesus. There in the neighborhood. There in the everyday grit and grind of life. They weren't going to be transported off to some idyllic land where there were no difficulties, no pain, no suffering. God wasn't going to swoop in and magically make everything right. Instead they were to return to real life. It was there that they would see Jesus. It was there that they would know that the presence of Jesus, now the risen Christ, was among them, in them and with them always.

Before the world came into being the Word was with God and the Word was God. That Word – Jesus Christ – moved into our neighborhood and dwelt among us. He did not shy away from the truth of human existence. He took the bad along with the good. He carried the sorrow along with the joy. He experienced the worst – rejection, betrayal, torture – and he died. But that was not the end. It never was and never will be the end. Jesus Christ is risen! The Word of God lives on! What was there in the beginning, is still there and always will be there. There is no limit to God's love. The full, vibrant life that Jesus offers is big enough to include even its opposite: death. It is big enough to hold the awful realities the suffering people of the Congo. It is big enough to hold a dream of wholeness for the whole world. It is big enough to cover all our sins.

Sisters and brothers, on this resurrection morning, listen for God's voice: "Look, my beloved ones, I am so very near to you. Know that this is true. I am with you and I know you. I understand you deeply and completely. My love for you and the world cannot be shaken. There is nothing that will ever separate you from my love."

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Christ is risen! This is our reality. Praise and glory be to God!