

Pray. Love. Exercise. Give.

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

The Feast of St. Francis & the launch of “We Are One Body” ~ October 4, 2020

Open our hearts, O God, to embrace one another in your love. Amen.

In a recent article in *The New York Times*, social scientists affirm what many of us are experiencing – that extended isolation from one another is making some of us feel skittish or clumsy in our social interactions, wary around others in public, and irritable, lethargic, or grumpy at home.

Says the report, “Research on prisoners, hermits, astronauts, polar explorers and others who have spent extended periods in isolation indicates social skills are like muscles that atrophy from lack of use. People separated from society report feeling more socially anxious, impulsive, awkward and intolerant when they return to normal life.

“Psychologists and neuroscientists say something similar is happening to all of us now, thanks to the pandemic. We are subtly but inexorably losing our facility and agility in social situations — people oversharing on Zoom, overreacting to or misconstruing one another’s behavior, longing for but then not really enjoying contact with others.” There are biological reasons for this; we need one another to fend off the woolly mammoths. Isolation puts us in survival mode. (“We’re All Socially Awkward Now,” Kate Murphy, NYT, 9.1.2020)

The remedy – and there is a remedy – is to connect with others.

To affirm the same thing theologically, we are created for love – from love, with love, to love. God so loved the world that God gave his only begotten son. Just as I have loved you, said Jesus, you also need to love one another. Above all, love God, love your neighbor, as you love your self. Who is my neighbor? Jesus told us of the good Samaritan, the one who cares for the downtrodden. Feed my sheep, he instructed. Tend the sick, visit those in prison; as you have done it for the least of these, you have done it for me. We are created for love. Love is patient; not envious, boastful, or resentful; it does not insist on its own way, nor rejoice in wrongdoing.

Connect, say the social scientists; love, says Jesus.

Through the years, I’ve found that when I set out for what I expect to be a hard chapter, it is essential to prioritize and practice four things: pray, spend time with people I love, exercise, and give. These are important all the time, but when life gets crazy, I can let them slip by the wayside; so I need to be more intentional.

Eight or nine years ago I took on a really hard task. My compadres gave me this boxing mask and wished me luck. That’s often how we face challenging times. We put on some extra padding, step into the ring, clench our arms in defense, or start swinging away. I’ve put it on for fun and keep it in my office as a reminder, but it’s not the path I choose.

Pray, love, exercise, and give. Exercise you can figure out. Let me speak about the other three: praying, loving and giving.

Ever since the outbreak of the coronavirus and the necessity to close our physical doors, St. Columba’s – just like every other church, household, and organization – has been thrust into uncharted territory. Since that day in March, we’ve been collectively – sometimes even intentionally – asking ourselves three questions. What is essential? What is expendable? What innovation is needed?

What is essential? Grounding ourselves in the word of God, staying connected in love, and caring for those in need, giving ourselves for others. Pray, love, give. These weren't just my answers; they were affirmed through-out this congregation, from every part of the body, as if with one voice. Within weeks, the mother's group created a phone tree to call those known to be a certain age or living alone. Later this expanded and calls were made to 750 households. Small groups that could, continued to meet; new ones were created – to read scripture, to pray, to check-in with one another. We reached out in partnership and launched the initiative to end family homelessness in the District of Columbia, committed ourselves to becoming antiracist, opened the nursery school, started producing Daily Bread. More children today are singing in our choirs than last year. Forty-five households joined as new members, scores join us each week through online worship and ministry. Our website is our new front door.

We've lost a great deal; it is true. I miss being with you in person. I miss celebrating the sacraments with you, and the casual unplanned interactions of gathering in ways large and small. Some of our ministries are on hiatus, which means some of you are unable to exercise those particular gifts. I am sorry. This is hard. Because we cannot take connection with one another for granted, we are continually looking for new ways to do so. We are one body as the church. And because our nation is in such pain and turmoil, we are increasingly engaged and responsive. We are one body as citizens of this nation and world.

Praying keeps us centered in the vision and promise God has planted in our hearts, sometimes allowing us to rest in God, other times inspiring us to action in pursuit of beloved community. Loving keeps us connected, keeps those love muscles strong. As one body; as one suffers we all suffer, as one rejoices we all rejoice.

For me, giving requires the most intention. When I'm having a hard time, my natural inclination is to turn inward, to curl up – physically, emotionally; to conserve, to hang on. But time after time I have found this only makes me small, isolated and unhappy. And time after time, mostly through prayer or the cries of others, I have heard Jesus' invitation to look about me through God's eyes of compassion, to see and respond to the needs of others. Give what you have, come follow me. Feed my sheep.

A member of this parish died a couple of years ago. I visited him in the hospital, his body frail, his mind sharp. He was troubled. Because every week he went downtown to help serve lunch to people who were hungry. And because his illness had come on suddenly those he served wouldn't know why he wasn't there. Giving.

You and I have each received a most extraordinary gift. God has planted within the soul of each one of us a vision of the world as it could be, the world as God intends – of reconciliation, reparation, justice, and love. We each have received gifts that we can use and share as steps toward that vision.

We're not alone: on days when for us the vision has dimmed, when despair or exhaustion overwhelm us, we've lost our way, and things are just too hard. . . . We are blessed to have this community of St Columba's with whom to gather – even at a distance; those who will pray with us and for us, and help us recall the vision from God. God is faithful and we are on this journey together.

So, I have an ask: I ask you to invest in this vision and our mission. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. I know some of you have more than you possibly need, and I

know some of you don't have enough to make payments coming due this week. I am asking every single one of you to make a financial pledge to the ministry of this church as a way to help bring about the vision God planted in your soul. The vision of God will not be realized until everyone's in. We cannot get there without one another.

I am asking you to give more than you've ever given before, and I'd like some of you to consider a dramatic increase. Not because we have a bigger budget or need to buy new things; we don't. I am asking you to give more because I know that some among us will not be able; some among us are really struggling. Giving sacrificially for the well-being of others is at the heart of our calling as people trying to follow Christ and live God's love. Members of the vestry and I have made our pledges. We are giving sacrificially from our own sense of abundance and gratitude – gratitude for God's blessings and for you, your love, and your witness to God's love. Please join us.

Finally, I'd like to pray – in words attributed to St. Francis on this his feast day. This is going to be my own prayer for the coming weeks; it feels to me an absolutely perfect and surprising reversal for this season in our nation because it commits us to take that which is amiss and turn it aright.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon;
where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*

So, I'm thinking you might be glad to receive a word of hope. Yes? That you might be feeling worn down and thirsty for a word that lifts your spirits, sheds some light on your path, maybe evens put a little pep in your step.

Said Isaiah, Come to me, all who thirst; come to the waters. Said Jesus, come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened.

Dear Ones, you've come to the right place. I come – to St. Columba's, to church, to God, to you – for the story; I'm here today because, like you, I'd like a word of good news; I'm here for the story – of God's love, God's promise, God's faithfulness.

We're living with a lot of tension right now. Truth be told, to live the Christian life is to live with tension – between the world as it is, and the world as God would have it be, as God intends and desires for us, as God promises. You know the story line for the world as it is – the rough and tumble reflected daily in the news, as well as the hard things some of us are facing in our own homes or hearts and minds. We get a glimpse in the gospel reading – which is a picture of the world as it is – with landowners and wealth, laboring tenants living in poverty erupting in violent protest when confronted with yet additional demands made from above and afar. I'm not going to dwell on it. It could be anytime anywhere – power, wealth, poverty, those who have and those who do not.

The “world as it is,” built around a premise of limited resources, pits us against one another, and reinforces the prideful inclination that we must each look out for ourselves and our own. The good news in today's gospel is that Jesus is addressing the issues head-on, revealing the inconsistencies of the world-as-it-is, pointing to a world – where the rejected stone becomes the cornerstone on which the future glory of God shall be built, where the last shall be first, and the least shall know mercy, justice and abundance.

. Henri Nouwen confirmed my own experience when he said, “You won't become poorer, you will become richer by giving.”