

Sermon: November 5, 2023 - Revelation 7: 9-17

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Thirty years ago, marriage counselor Gary Chapman, Ph.D., wrote an influential and enduring book entitled *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts*. In this book, Dr. Chapman proposes that people experience love differently and identifies five categories through which people receive and express love: words of affirmation, acts of service, [giving and] receiving gifts, quality time and physical touch.

While the book was intended for intimate couples to understand and strengthen their relationships, I find this model of “love languages” describes a range of non-romantic ways that we reach out to people in all manner of circumstances. When we see someone grieving, or in a challenging personal situation, or under a lot of pressure, or in a position of isolation or exclusion, we might be a bit stymied in knowing what to do, how to reach out. My sense, when one feels stuck in this way, is that the intersection between the ways that you are most comfortable *expressing* care and concern, and the ways that this person is most drawn to *receive* your care and concern – can be an authentic place to start.

Thinking back to times when I was grieving or troubled or otherwise out of sorts, the simplest of things have meant so much: a word of support from an unexpected source, someone shoveling my sidewalk, a gift card for a meal out, time spent walking and talking or just visiting, and a hug or a hand on my shoulder. That last one, physical touch, you need to be careful with – very careful - but in general I have found that care can be conveyed in a bunch of different ways, and when offered from the heart and with full respectfulness of what the recipient does or does not need at the moment, the variety of love languages can bring great comfort and encouragement.

Curiously, that leads me into today’s reading from the book of Revelation. It’s a reading that I have experienced most often at funerals or on Remembrance Day, in particular verses 16 and 17: “They will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” I think of times when this was just the right scripture to share at a Memorial Service, especially for a death following a long time of suffering, or a death out of season, and there is something especially moving about the way that these words speak on Remembrance Day, to lives have been permanently marred or prematurely ended because of war. In the midst of the big, hard-to-understand imagery in the book of Revelation, these words of ultimate and heavenly hope speak to us in ways that do not trivialize the pain; they express God’s “love language” of presence and comfort. The good shepherd “will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Theologian Micah Kiel cautions against *only* reading these words as a picture of the afterlife or end times, though, for the Book of Revelation, with all its big, weird imagery, was written in order to express hope IN THIS MOMENT for people facing great oppression and suffering, even martyrdom. These words, while not denying eternal comfort, did not defer hope to a life beyond this life. And, Professor Kiel asserts, the author of the book of Revelation – traditionally understood to be a man named John writing from the island of Patmos - was enduring the same life and death struggles as those to whom he was writing. These were not speculative words from one safely removed from life; these words, with their heavily-encoded, deeply political messages were very much written “in the trenches,” fully aware of the hardships of the day. And the words that John shared were not just off the top of his head; he

had a very real and present sense that these sentiments were revelations shared with him by none other than the risen Christ, words reaching from the heart of Christ's sufferings and resurrection to all who are in peril.

This authenticity, born out of John's own experience and the care of Christ crucified and risen, means a lot. And it leads me to recount the words and experience of another person who, like John of Patmos, experienced bleak times, and in those hardships was given by Christ enduring words of hope and comfort. Four years ago, I had the great gift of spending Holy Week in the city of Norwich, going to the Cathedral two or three times a day for worship and lectures and choral music that soared to the skies. While in Norwich, I moved from barely a passing knowledge of the 14th century Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich, to a deep, abiding relationship with her.

We know little of her early life, though there are clues that point to a life of nobility. Those same clues suggest that she had been married, and both her husband and child died. This was a common experience in Norwich, where in the 14th century *half of the population died*, either from one of the three separate waves of the plague, or from battles in the 100 years' war. We do know that she lived much of her adult life living in a small living quarters in St Julian's Church – she took her name from the Church, rather than the other way around – and that people would come to see her, visiting, learning from her, praying with her, and bringing simple foods to sustain her.

We also know that after a time when she nearly died of illness, she had a profound set of visions in which Christ, from the cross, shared with her all manner of things. And among the things shared with her, which is particularly apropos to our reading from Revelation, is this: in her infirmity, Jesus looked at her with love, and said "ALL SHALL BE WELL." Here's the full quote, from Julian (Manton p.110, 68.16.66-73):

And this word: you shall not be overcome, was said sharply and mightily, for sureness and comfort against all tribulations that may come. He did not say: you shall not be troubled, he did not say you shall not struggle, he did not say you shall not be diseased; but he did say: you shall not be overcome. God wills that we take heed at this word, and that our faithful trust be strong in well and woe, for he loves us and delights in us...and all shall be well.

In these words, still powerful more than six hundred years later, we hear a God who knows suffering, and God's servant Julian, who also knew suffering, speaking to a context where war and illness were running rampant. Amidst the troubles and struggles, as one who had persevered, she could say "you shall not be overcome...and all shall be well" with full confidence. This was faith born in trial, not an empty platitude.

For more than 20 months, Ukraine has been under attack, and for a month, now, the eyes of the world have been on Gaza and Israel, and our hearts have wondered what would help, what would speak God's own words of hope. And we realize, as the situation in war zones remains intense, that emotions are spilling over not only there, but worldwide. On November 1st, an article on the CNN website caught my eye. Speaking to the Jewish, Arab and Muslim communities – not in the middle east, but in the USA – it asked this question: "how have you seen your community in the US change in the weeks since the October 7th Hamas attack on Israel, and Israel's military response in Gaza? As a member of the Jewish, Arab or Muslim communities in America, have you felt the need to adjust your daily life amid heightened fears of hate-motivated incidents? Are you avoiding certain activities or places, or have you experienced a hateful incident?" The way the question was asked, it wasn't a matter of *whether* such incidents were happening, but where, how often, how

damaging? An opportunity was given for people in such situations to share their stories. And as I think of the life for these groups in the US and Canada and the UK, and of course in the Middle East, I think of that promise in Revelation, of a God who does not defer or delay a loving response, but steps into the terror and pain and violence, helping them find respite and wiping away every tear from their eyes. I think also of the One who from the cross spoke to Julian, entering the reality of her pain and promising that all would be well.

There are hard times in life when the direct presence of God – whether experienced as parent or creator, as the suffering Christ or the risen Christ, as the divine comforter or the divine advocate – is what we need most urgently. And bringing us back to that notion of love languages, there are other times when the thing we need is a love in human form: human kindness reaching out with gifts of food or reassuring words, human presence expressed by a long walk or talk or both, the support of someone who will go with you to a difficult meeting or get involved in political action to help your cause, the touch of another hand resting on yours ... all of these are ways in which God's love takes human form and is made known.

Whether you, in this moment, are carrying heavy burdens of your own – or are deeply engaged in supporting the challenges of another – or are involved in one of our Ministries which offers tangible support – or are caught in the vortex of a repeating newscycle of helplessness – may the words offered today by John of Patmos, by Julian of Norwich, by a divine presence touching your heart, bring you the hope-filled love of a God who is in the very midst of your life's hardest places, and inspire you to find loving ways to be that presence of hope for others. Friends in Christ, may peace be with you, Amen.

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