

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 15, 2022

Delivered by the Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas at Christ Episcopal Church, Greenwich, CT

John 13:31-35

Love in a time of climate emergency

What a blessing to be with you this morning! I serve the two Episcopal dioceses in Massachusetts, as well as the United Church of Christ in southern New England. In this wonderful ecumenical role, I travel from place to place, speaking about our Gospel call to love the Earth that God entrusted to our care. (If you'd like to know more about what I'm up to, please visit my website, RevivingCreation.org.)

We have a wonderful text to reflect on this morning, a passage from the Gospel of John. The scene is the Last Supper, and Jesus is beginning to say goodbye. He knows that his life is about to be cut short and that the next day he will die. So, Jesus gathers with his friends for a final meal, and in an act of humble service, he washes their feet. Then, as Judas steps out into the night to betray him, Jesus turns to the gathered circle and says those familiar words: "Little children, I am with you only a little longer... I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:31-35).

These are urgent and tender words, the words of someone facing death and eager to convey what really matters. "Little children, love one another." I'm told that in John the Evangelist's old age, that was the message he brought to one community of faith after another: "Little children, love one another." After spending time with Jesus – after years of meditating on Jesus' life and teaching, on Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection – the aging evangelist could find no more direct route into the heart of the Gospel than simply to say, "Little children, love one another."

This brings to mind a poem by Michael Leunig:¹

There are only two feelings. Love and fear.
 There are only two languages. Love and fear.
 There are only two activities. Love and fear.
 There are only two motives, two procedures,
 two frameworks, two results.
 Love and fear.
 Love and fear.

Jesus calls us to love, but, honestly, most of us know quite a lot about fear. We may go to a lot of trouble not to look anxious or afraid, but most of us come up against fear every day. Fear comes in all shapes and sizes. And we know what *that's* like: we hold our breath, our bellies clench, and our hearts race.

There's a lot of fear going around right now, and for good reason. In addition to our personal fears, we feel a collective shudder about the state of the world, with its daunting array of challenges. For me, it's the ecological crisis that wakes me up at night. Scientists report that the web of life is unraveling before our eyes, and it's no exaggeration to say that human society is at risk of collapse. Just think: the number of animals around the world has plummeted by over half in less than 50 years, mostly by the development of great swaths of land and the destruction of habitat. [Human activity has wiped out 60% of the world's mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and fish since 1970.](#) Alarmed scientists are describing what they call a "biological

annihilation.” [One expert commented](#): “This is far more than just being about losing the wonders of nature, desperately sad though that is... This is actually now jeopardizing the future of people. Nature is not a ‘nice to have’ – it is our life-support system.”

And then there’s the climate crisis. Burning fossil fuels is pushing the planet to record levels of heat, causing droughts, floods, and monster hurricanes, drowning cities, and accelerating wildfires. The people hit first and hardest by a changing climate are racial minorities, indigenous peoples, and the poor. But unless we change course fast, even those of us – like me – who are wealthy, white, and privileged won’t be able to give our children and our children’s children a habitable world.

So, are we afraid? You bet we’re afraid, and if we’re not, we ought to be. Fear is appropriate and real, and fear can propel us to take urgently needed and long-delayed action. But fear can also freeze us in our tracks, so that we get paralyzed and stuck in inertia, wondering if it’s worth doing anything at all: “Maybe it’s too late to change course. Maybe we’re too far gone. Besides, what difference can one person make?” Immobilized by fear, we can shut down, put up blinkers, and carry on with business as usual, even if business as usual is wrecking the planet. And fear can separate us from each other, so that we push each other aside and build walls to keep each other out and keep each other down.

That’s why I find Jesus’ words so powerful: they dispel fear. “Little children, love one another,” Jesus says to us. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Our fear may be strong, and the powers-that-be in this world may be doing all they can to stoke our fears of each other and to pull us apart, but Jesus’ words and presence convey bracing good news: we are infused and surrounded by a divine love that holds us together and will never let us go. God loves us and all Creation with a love that nothing can destroy. As we breathe that divine love in and as we share it with each other and the world around, our moral courage and strength are renewed. That is the great gift that communities of faith can give the world in such a frightening time: practices of prayer and community, practices of meditation and storytelling, practices of singing and ceremony, that connect us with a sacred, loving Power beyond ourselves. We don’t have to settle for a life that is undergirded and overshadowed by fear. As the Persian poet Hafiz once put it, “Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I’d like to see you in better living conditions.”² When we move out of fear and into God’s love, we discover how precious we are, how precious our neighbors are, how precious this whole, beautiful planet is, and we rise up, filled with Spirit, as healers and justice-seekers, building community as we go.

When it comes to tackling climate change, there is so much that we can do! Maybe we can plant trees. Save trees. Recycle more. Drive less. Eat local, eat organic, eat less meat, and move to a plant-based diet. Maybe we can support local farms and land trusts. We can fly less – and, if we must fly, we can [buy carbon offsets](#). Maybe we can afford solar panels and move toward a carbon-neutral home. If we have financial investments, we can divest from fossil fuels; if we’re college graduates, we can push our alma mater to divest, as well.

Individual changes make a difference, but because of the scope and speed of the climate crisis, we need more than individual action – we also need systemic change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports that we need to transform our society and economy at a rate and scope that are historically unprecedented. To do that, we will have to confront the powers that benefit from and keep us stuck in an unjust status quo. So, maybe you’ll [join the campaign to push the four biggest banks that finance fossil fuels](#) (Chase, CitiBank, Wells Fargo, and Bank of America) to quit propping up the oil and gas industry. We want to build a world in which everyone can thrive.

Will our efforts be successful? Will we avert runaway climate change? I don't know. But I do know that every choice matters. Every degree of temperature-rise matters. "[Even a tenth of a degree Celsius means the difference between life and death for millions of people.](#)" And love matters. Love matters most of all. That's what Jesus conveys in his words to us this morning, and when he gives himself to us in the consecrated bread and wine. If you knew you could not fail – if you were set free from fear – what would you do for the healing of our world?

¹ Michael Leunig, *A Common Prayer* (NY: HarperCollins, 1991).

² Hafiz, quoted by Jack Kornfield, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace* (New York: Bantam Books, 2002), 83.