

The Strength to Love

Isaiah 11:1-9: *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge of the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid. The calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

2 Corinthians 5: 14-18: *For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore, all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.*

A wolf will lie down with a lamb, and a child will play over the hole of a snake. Wow! Those are pretty powerful and kind of scary images if you are a lamb or a child! Think about it. We don't live among wolves or lambs and don't have many snake holes around, so we may not be able to grasp the full power of a helpless young baby sheep—the kind that would make a fabulous lunch for a wolf family—lying down in peace with a wolf with huge fangs and claws that could

rip him up in shreds in a heartbeat.

Or who in their right mind would allow a child to play over the hole of a snake that could swallow her whole or, minimally, bite her and cause death in a matter of seconds?

These are profound images of danger. The picture that Isaiah's writer gives us is of a world where the deepest and most unimaginable fears are overcome by a new kind of kingdom of love, where living creatures who are brutal enemies dwell as friends. Is he crazy?

Maybe he is. But this is the image he gives us of the City of God, God's Kingdom, which this sprout from Jesse's stump will bring. We Christians claim Jesus as this "sprout" and Jesus' love as source of this "peaceable" Kingdom.

Modern-day Parallels

Because we 21st-century Americans don't run into these kinds of animals regularly, it may be hard for us to grasp the absolute radical nature of these images. I've never seen a wolf, except for in a zoo. And we are not farmers here, so most of us don't see lambs every day.

It might help us to put some modern, 2017 American images and fears in place of those in this text. We might consider that in this kingdom the writer of Isaiah envisions, an ISIS terrorist and an American will sit together holding hands and sing songs of unity. Or imagine a Trump supporter and NAACP leader hiring a babysitter together so they can go out and have dinner at a restaurant on the Mexican border. One of our congregation's young children, 5-year-old Jeremy Ealy, will play safely on the corner of Empire and Broadway at midnight with the whole neighborhood watching out for him. Police officers will be praying with people, and people will give police officers coffee in their homes and praying for them. A murderer and his victim's families will have communion together. Facebook and Twitter will be places to go for encouragement and to learn how to foster unity amid diverse opinion. And little Taylor Wilson and Sylvia Van Beek in our congregation will show us the way.

In our world, those things—like Isaiah’s ideas of wolves and lambs lying down together—sound a little crazy, don’t they?

As we all know, this is the weekend every year when our nation celebrates the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King invited all of us Americans into many new ways of living and being together. One of them was that we learn to live as what he called the “Beloved Community.” Dr. King’s vision of the “beloved community” included a picture of all people having what they need to survive and thrive irrespective of race, gender or social class. A “beloved community” is safe for all people. A “beloved community” is a place where all children can get a good education and have access to what they need to grow up as responsible, loving citizens. This picture Isaiah gives us, or ways that we might imagine it in modern terms, are pictures of what this “beloved community” might look like.

Dr. King knew, as does the writer of Isaiah, that this kind of community can only grow from LOVE. It can’t be forced or cajoled or manufactured. It grows ... from love.

Strange Kind of Lovers

And Paul picks up this idea in our text from 2 Corinthians. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth. And this church was divided. They were getting polarized over which leader in the church to follow. Imagine that: human beings getting polarized on issues and leaders. And they had some people in their church who were using their position to hurt other people. Imagine that: people using power and position to hurt others. Paul admonishes them to let Christ’s love lead them in these situations.

Paul says, “Let the love of Christ urge you on.” The New American Standard Version says it this way: “Let the love of Christ control you.” Implied there is that they were letting other things—their wants, their needs, their ideas, their fears—control them. Paul says, “Let the love of Christ control you.”

And then Paul tells this struggling church that if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a “new

creation.” The old has passed, the new has come. The old ways of might makes right. The old ways of holding onto grudges. The old ways of seeing people as categories and groups. The old ways of fear that keep us clinging to what is ours.

In the Greek here, this word “new” is *kainos*, and it includes in it a connotation of “strange.” If anyone is in Christ he is a “strange” creation. The world doesn’t understand people, like Isaiah, who would see visions of wolves and lambs hanging out together. The world doesn’t understand Dr. King, who encouraged men and women whose people had been lynched, raped, and disregarded for centuries to actually learn how to LOVE their oppressors and to live by the law of love rather than by the law of might makes right. And so we can see them as strange. The world doesn’t understand this kind of crazy love: people who seek to love each other irrespective of their race, creed, sexual orientation or ZIP code. The world doesn’t understand this strange kind of lovers, this new kind of human beings.

But when Christ’s love gets inside us, this is what we find ourselves being and doing. When Christ’s love gets inside us—grows in us—that is what we are called to be and do. To be these strange and new creations that pine for, that yearn for, this beloved community more than we yearn for “being right.” To be these strange and new creations that wrestle with what it means to love our enemies, pray for those who hurt us, stand up for justice, and live into hope when all seems dark and lost.

Antibiotic for a National Infection

My brothers and sisters in Christ, I don’t need to tell you that right now we are living in a time in the United States when fear and division and hatred seem to be winning in our national and political discourse and life together. No matter what our political persuasions or views, I think we can all agree that the vileness and the hatred and judgment we are showering on each other are causing a great infection in our nation. And we can’t cure that infection with more guns or more fighting or more self-righteous posts on Facebook.

The only antibiotic for this kind of infection is for us to discern how to let *love* win in our lives.

And as the song goes, “let it begin with me.” We can’t control our politicians or leaders—though we can pray for them, write to them, and get involved in efforts to ensure justice and fair dialogue. We can support the press and insist on fair reporting. But, in the final analysis, the only people we can really control are ourselves.

When Dr. King was leading the civil rights movement in the 1960s, there were many training sessions to teach people how to respond nonviolently in the face of hatred. It was incumbent on every person in the movement to control themselves—to face the hatred with love. Not by letting themselves be abused, but by standing up, looking the oppressor in the face and loving them still. For the movement to succeed, each person had to do that for his or her self.

And so, as we live into these days of deepening political divide in our nation, we cannot expect our president and our elected officials to do this job for us. Each of us has the choice today about how we are going to live, and each of us is invited by Jesus—and in these texts by Isaiah and by Paul—to be “crazy, strange” people in the world because we believe in this vision of the beloved community and are going to do our part to live in love and peace each day.

My brothers and sisters, this is no easy task. Because the kind of love we are talking about is not a wimpy love. Dr. King taught that it takes incredible strength to love in this way. It is a love that stands up for what is right and will not let people be abused. It’s the kind of love that won’t let a racist comment roll off our backs or just stand by if a disabled person is being taken advantage of. Yes, it is a strong love. But it is a love that still sees the “image of God” in all human beings—even those we disagree with the most or those who are the most despicable or, dare I even say, deplorable?

And I don’t know how to tell us how to live this balance of respecting and valuing the “child of God” in each of us while also being intolerant of injustice and evil. But I do know that we as Christ followers are invited to live into this struggle and wrestle with what this means. And we can teach and support each other in this struggle.

Paul says we are “in Christ.” And as we are “in Christ,” we can learn day by day this way of loving and leading our lives. As we are “in Christ” we can learn how to foster this beloved community that Dr. King talked about and worked hard for.

Sprouts from Dead Stumps

The Isaiah text also gives us some guidance. Think about the idea of a “sprout”—this sprout from the stump of Jesse. Of course, we understand this sprout to be Jesus. The image here is of a green sprout coming forth from a dead old stump.

You’ve seen those before, haven’t you? You walk by a stump on the ground and you think it is dead and, ah, there are some green sprouts trying to grow out of it, and you know there is life there. Maybe that stump wasn’t as dead as you thought it was.

And maybe the stump of our political discourse isn’t as dead as we think it is, either. Because we are “in Christ,” maybe we are meant to be sprouts. Maybe we are meant to keep our eyes peeled for other “Jesus kind” of sprouts of love and peace and nurture those in each other.

So, it begins with each us of, my brothers and sisters.

These prayers from Presbyterian pastor, J. Barrie Shepherd, have been mentoring me of late. He writes:

May I take peace and love behind the wheel of my automobile, peace into the supermarket, discount store, and coffee shop. May peace and love sprout from me in my workplace, setting the boundaries, determining the textures of all my words and actions. As I break bread with my family and friends, may that bread become a sacrament of peace and love. If I should differ and dispute with those around me, may I differ within the overarching context of that basic regard for the dignity of ALL God’s children which is the heart of all true peace and love.

It takes strength to choose this each day—especially when we are confused and discouraged by

the opinions and values of others. But the promise is that, “in Christ,” we can learn the way. The promise is that, “in Christ,” we may be strange, but we will also be new.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, if you do nothing else in these times, be a sprout of the beloved kingdom today—wherever you go, in all you do. Jesus will show us the way. Jesus will give us the strength to love.

Amen.