

Sermon for 5-17-20 (ser20-20) – Trinity UCC, by Pastor Gerry
What's Love Look Like in Unsettling Times? Loving Others Where They Are"
Based on the Gospel of John 14:15-21

I love poetry. Even though I came to be an avid reader/collector of poetry later in life, most times it feels like I have read it all my life. My range of poetic interest is quite wide and varied. I have seven books of poems by the 13th Century Sufi poet, Rumi; a number of books of poems (and fiction) by the framer/poet, Wendell Berry; and numerous other current and contemporary collections by poets of African descent.

Do I have a favorite? Depends on my mood or the theme of a sermon I'm working on at the time. For instance, given the text from John's gospel today about love and the Holy Spirit, I am drawn to the poetry of Mary Oliver. Her poetry focuses primarily on nature and animals, but she often ties together nature and prayer or the land and love. She has a lovely series of poems about praying. Let me just share this one as a freebie. This Mary Oliver on Prayer: *"It doesn't have to be the blue Iris, it could be weeds in a vacant lot, or a few small stones; just pay attention, then patch a few words together and don't try to make them elaborate, this isn't a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak."* I love this idea of how to pray and to love.

When I first read out text from John, chapter 14, verses 15-21 again a couple weeks ago, I immediately thought of Mary Oliver's poem, "My Work is to Love the World." This poem is in a collection of poems, titled Thirst, which was published in 2006, about 13 years before her death in 2019. Listen to Mary Oliver: "My Work is to Love the World:

***"My work is to love the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—
Equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.
Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect?
Let me Keep my mind on what matters,
Which is my work?
Which is mostly standing still and learning to be
Astonished. And LOVING THE WORLD.***

Wasn't Jesus saying the very same thing? Set in a different context, Jesus says in John 14

¹⁵ "If you love me, you will keep^[a] my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Lord, and the Lord will give you another Advocate,^[b] to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees the Spirit nor knows the Spirit. You know God, because God abides with you, and God will be in^[c] you. ¹⁸ "I will not leave you orphaned; I am

coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am I the Lord, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by God, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

Jesus is also saying that as his disciples, as people of faith and as ones who call ourselves, 'Christian,' our work is to love the world, to love all people where we meet them.

The sermon title today suggests that living out Christ's commandment to love has something to do with standing still long enough and quiet enough that we notice others as we meet them where they are in their lives.....This is where loving others begins.....right where people are...--NOT where we or even who we want them to be.

Who are some of the people you meet these days? Well, for starters, given our "stay at home" status, and our social distancing, we meet fewer and fewer people. When we do go out, we meet others with face masks, face masks of all types, colors and shapes. In the grocery store we meet people who are afraid and seem quite worried about being with others in public. We meet others, however, who seem to be oblivious to all the concern and will easily walk too close.

This past weekend, Pat and I, for an outing just to get outside, drove over to Annapolis. We got a sandwich in a small deli and went to a park and with the chill in the air just sat in my truck and ate our lunch. Driving through down town part of the State capital, we encountered a small group of protesters, some with guns on their shoulders and on their hips, none with face masks, all waking right next to each other, and all carrying signs which read: "OPEN UP THE STATE; OPEN UP THE ECONOMY: NOW." And some other sayings, most of which I wanted to label as "stupid," or "ignorant," or worse.

I don't share their demands. I listen to the scientists and health experts for guidance for "opening" up social life, businesses, and churches back to the old or new normal, not to a group of folks that seem to care more about their own desires than for the good of the whole community. In seeing that group of rather tough-looking protestors, I thought to myself, "this concerns me; I don't like what they are doing; I think they would rather put others and themselves at risk than to help keep us all safe. To be very honest, I don't like them. But do I love them? Can I even try to love them?"

If I turn to Mary Oliver's declaration that "my work is to love the world," then I suppose I must try to love those protestors...where they are in their lives right now.

With some distance away from that group of last Saturday, I do wonder what's going on in their lives. Why are they so angry? What's happening to their jobs? What addictions are getting the best of them right now? Who's had a loved one to die from Corvid19? And not able to process that in contrast

to the demands they're making of the Governor. Each one of them has a story too. What do I make of those stories?

And if I read John 14, I am left with nothing else but to love them. It is exactly what Jesus commands of us. And we ought not forget what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:43-47 (The Message):

⁴³⁻⁴⁷ "You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. God gives the best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

Let's be honest. This work of 'loving the world' is hard work, especially when it comes to loving and meeting people where we find them – with where they are on life's journey. I don't want to be on the same street, much less in the same state as those protestors I saw in Annapolis this past Saturday. But that's NOT WHAT Jesus calls, demands, commands of me.

This is not about Christian love as a feeling or an emotion trying to be expressed from my comfortable living room couch while watching protestors carrying guns on TV. This is about meeting them on the street in encounter with the real world...the world I am called to love. This kind of Love is an action, a specific action that is directed toward another; loving the other in whatever way we can.

Our love – our work in the world – is a response to being loved first... As Jesus puts it, "We love because God first loved us." We love because we have been loved -- WHY IS LOVE CALLED THE MOST POWERFUL FORCE IN THE WORLD? BOTH THE GIVER AND RECEIVER ARE TRANSFORMED.

May it be so in your lives and in mine this day. Amen