

The Spirit of Truth

Over the past eight weeks since COVID-19 appeared in Manitoba, we've been receiving constant directives from our Public Health authorities. The message about what we should be doing in this extraordinary time has been clear: Wash your hands. Practise social distancing - keep two metres apart from each other. Stay home as much as possible. Avoid unnecessary travel. It's a message that's been repeated over and over, drilled into us so thoroughly that most of us can repeat it by heart. And that clear, direct message has been effective. Most Manitobans have followed the health advice given to us, resulting in relatively low numbers of COVID-19 cases in our province, and allowing us to begin the gradual processing of re-opening. We know that if we're ever uncertain about what to do in the midst of this pandemic, we only have to listen to one of those public health officials who will set us on a straight path.

In that reading from John's Gospel we just heard, we are given another bite-sized portion of a huge speech spoken by Jesus – his Farewell message to his disciples on the night before he died. That message feels a bit like a symphony, with familiar refrains weaving in and out of the composition, themes that we recognize and that help anchor us in what we've heard before, but with each one taking us a bit deeper into the mystery and beauty of the composition. In today's reading we find Jesus returning to the theme of love before going on to touch on another important topic. That theme is very important. The only commandment that John attributes to Jesus in his Gospel is that of loving one another. Not long before Jesus began his Farewell address he washed his disciples' feet at the Last Supper, then told them "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Now we hear it again where Jesus says, "If you love me, you will obey that commandment to love." It's that simple and that profound for John that he states it again and again, drilling the message deep down into the disciples' hearts. And it is as they love, that Jesus promises God will send another "Friend" to be with them, the Holy Spirit. The word "Friend" that The Message version of Scripture uses is "Paraclete" in Greek, which can also be translated as "Helper" or "Advocate" or "Counsellor" and who Jesus also describes as the "Spirit of truth." The Holy Spirit

is the invisible presence of Jesus with us, guiding and directing us. Jesus has shown us how to love, and the Spirit will help us live out a life of love.

Living out a life of love. It sounds so simple, doesn't it? Jesus' commandment is clear and straightforward: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbour as yourself." That's the only thing we need to do as Christians. When we come to the end of a day, the one valid question we need to ask ourselves as we review it is "Where have I practiced love today?" And yet as human beings we know that it's not always easy to practise such love in real life. We often fail and falter in doing so. Instead of giving love away freely and fully to others, we often find a way to complicate and corrupt it. We make love conditional, reserving it for those whom we see as worthy, we hold it back from those who have wronged us, we hide our love behind walls and borders, giving it to some and not others. But God's love isn't like that. God's love is freely given, not earned, granted not demanded. God's love is uncomplicated and simple, for all. How can we live out this love in the midst of the painful and difficult situations we often face in life?

This past week some United church faith communities in Saskatoon came face to face with the challenge of living out a life of love with others. Two congregations: McLure United Church and Grosvenor Park United church, as well as St. Andrew's College, a theological school which trains people for ministry at the University of Saskatchewan had homophobic messages spray-painted on their buildings. All three places are Affirming Ministries of the United Church, faith communities that have publicly and intentionally declared their welcome and inclusion of the LGBTQ community, a process that we as a parish are currently engaged in as we move towards becoming an Affirming Ministry. When I heard about the vandalism in Saskatoon, my immediate response was anger and sadness that such a thing could happen. But then I read the response from St. Andrew's College that appeared on their Facebook page: "As followers of Jesus we wish to practice compassion toward the vandal" it said, a very different and much more gracious response than I had had. Others affected by the vandalism thought of the impact on the wider community. As Rev. Debra Berg, the minister of McClure United Church put it/said, "It's a stark reminder that there's still work to do around creating places of welcome and care for the LGBTQ plus community." All three

faith communities said that the vandalism had strengthened their resolve to be more welcoming of the LGBTQ plus community. They also went on to suggest a way to combat such hatred, inviting those who wished to decorate their sidewalks and walkways with chalk art, sharing messages of compassion and love.

Responding to hatred with compassion and love. Maybe that's why Jesus knew we would need the gift of the Holy Spirit when he was physically gone from us: a gift that would help us to love another in the midst of differences and difficult challenges. And maybe that's also why he knew how important it was to prepare us not for absence and abandonment, but for the Spirit's presence and companionship, given to guide and support us. That's something we are all experiencing a need for now in the midst of this pandemic with all its changes and challenges. As we continue to journey through this Easter season, having celebrated the joy of Christ's resurrection and anticipating the celebration of Pentecost in two weeks, the gift of God's Spirit poured out upon us, may that knowledge continue to sustain us. As the last lines of our United Church Creed say, "In life, in death, in life beyond death, we are not alone. Thanks be to God." Amen.