

“Love is the Answer”¹

Each week of Advent, we begin our service talking about light. As the sunlight recedes, our lives are enveloped in increasing darkness. Indeed, today is the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year.² We seek to bring more real light, metaphorical light, and spiritual light into our world. We light trees and wreaths. We festoon our homes with strings of lights. Some lights look restrained and classy. Others look garish and tacky. In Richmond, each year, there is a tacky lights tour. It used to be that we had to cruise neighborhoods to find the lights. Then there were printed maps. Now there are apps that will guide you from one tacky house to another. Anything to bring light into our dark and foreboding world.

In liturgical churches, we give names to the light. We started with hope on the Sunday farthest from Christmas. Trusting that God is with us and will see us through to the Nativity. Peace followed as we sought a spirit of calm in the face of a violent world and peace within. Joy was next. Joy is so important that it gets its own color—rose. This joy is not transient happiness. This is something deeply held. It lives like an ember inside our hearts. It never goes out, no matter what our hardships or despair. It is ready to set burst aflame within us.

That flame is love. We know that this love is not the sucky face, Valentine card, feverish kind of love. That love flames up but often burns out in short order. It is just fascination and infatuation, without anything to sustain it. There is nothing wrong with that kind of love if we do not get it confused with the real thing. Real love, the love from God as taught by Jesus, the prophets, and the saints, is profound. This type of love is selfless. This love looks at the world and individuals not as something or someone to satisfy our needs. Rather, real love asks, “What can I do to help another fulfill their potential? Brené Brown wrote, “The near enemy of love is attachment ... True love allows, honors, and appreciates; attachment grasps, demands, needs, and aims to possess.”

I look at the charities with which our parish is associated as examples of true love. There is Seven Loaves food pantry. The staff, volunteers, and board members are not creating a service to enrich themselves or their friends. They are working to feed families and individuals, most of whom they do not know. It is a righteous ministry, but it is also demanding work. The clients are not always grateful, nor need they be. They may be embarrassed because they need help. They may be stressed by the state of their finances, employment, or housing. They may be sick at heart that they cannot do better for their children, spouses, or others for whom they are responsible. The Seven Loaves

¹Once again, Todd Rundgren’s song “Love is the Answer” provides a sermon title.

From *Oops! Wrong Planet* by Utopia.

²The themes of solstice and light were inspired by an email exchange with Elizabeth Berridge.

volunteers must deal with that and inadequate resources. That means a family may not get the healthy food they need to flourish. But why should they care? They do not know who they are serving. But they do care because the love that God has put in them flows out to those in need. As St. Teresa of Avila said, they are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world.³ Their willingness to help others without judgment is the light that shines love into the darkness.

How about the people who are involved at LAWS (Loudoun Abused Women's Shelter)? Once again, we have a group of people, especially women, who come together to care for others. They may not have been abused themselves, but they recognize abuse has many aspects. Abuse is often physical, but it is also emotional and psychological. The abuser uses coercion to keep the abused in the relationship. The abuser may also use threats against children or other family members to keep the victim in line. Withholding financial resources is another way to keep the abused person from being able to escape the harmful situation. LAWS volunteers and staff work to alleviate and remediate the many ways in which these abused women are held in the clutches of fear. The workers have empathy and can put themselves in the shoes of others. Their care for those experiencing pain, fear, and loss. They are the light shining love into a heart where despair has darkened everything.

Blue Ridge Cares (formerly Blue Ridge Hospice) is another example of people putting empathic love into action. We know that we are all going to die, but many of us are ill-prepared, and many die alone. The Hospice movement recognized this and that some who are caring for a dying person have no idea what to do. Fear is a huge and isolating emotion. There is fear of the unknown and fear of making mistakes. There is also confusion with the complex healthcare system and the legal issues surrounding death. Hospice provides help for the dying and their caregivers. They have the information and a steady hand which can help everyone through this life stage. The hospice workers use their love light to pull back the curtain on the mysteries of death.

Finally, there is A Place To Be. The children and adults who are clients of APTB live on the margins in a way different from those needing food, suffering abuse, or dying. These people and their families are often aware of their limitations. They feel that society is sympathetic, but resources are limited to help them achieve their full potential. Music therapy has been shown by the dedicated therapists and interns at APTB to have significant results for these folks.

Friday night I saw their latest musical production—"A Christmas Carol." It was updated to 1985 and set in a video store. The dialogue was complete with gnarly, rad, and wicked cool slang. The period dress included bright neon and soft pastels. We saw people screwing up their courage and stepping onto a stage where they could almost touch the audience. There was no hiding at the

³ St. Teresa of Avila, "Christ has no body but yours."

back or in the wings. They showed confidence and real acting chops. It builds confidence, poise, and a belief that they have a place to be in the world. Everyone at APTB shines light into a world that seems dark and alien to those with cognitive, psychological, and physical challenges to face.

Loving, real loving, is hard. It is not the stuff of romance novels, greeting cards, or Hallmark movies. Loving can also end in disappointment or frustration. Then the challenge is how to go on loving and putting light into the world. It ended badly for Jesus. His disciples and many saints also met a painful end. It doesn't make sense. What is it about love that is so offensive to the world? Why are governments, militaries, corporations, and religions so set on manipulating love or crushing it?

We do not have an answer. Yet people keep on loving despite the powers and principalities who oppose them. As Elizabeth Strout wrote in her novel *Abide with Me*, "I suspect the most we can hope for, and it's no small hope, is that we never give up, that we never stop giving ourselves permission to try to love and receive love."⁴ Never stop loving and accepting love, may that be our hope, even in the darkest times.

⁴ Elizabeth Strout, *Abide with Me* [New York: Random House, 2006]