

I heard many wonderful speakers this last weekend while attending the Freedom Rising conference hosted by the Middle Collegiate Church in New York City. I was inspired, confronted, comforted and at one point brought to tears. A mother named Nelba Marquez-Greene who lost her child at Sandy Hook spoke about standing every day at the intersection of grief and injustice. A young woman named Arthur Riley spoke about dedicating her life's work to integrating Black emotion, Black literature, and the Black bodylife into spiritual practice. I listened to actress and activist Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor who spoke about the need to interrogate democracy in its present form, and then urged us to embrace the power of uncomfortable truth telling. These are just some of the amazing people I had the privilege of learning from.

As is often the case when one finds oneself in such sacred spaces, I left that gathering inspired and renewed. In fact it felt as though the Holy One herself had whispered a message to me as I sat in worship listening to the choir. It wasn't a new message. In fact it's one we've all heard before. But in the urgency of this particular moment in history, while politics divide us, and children and innocents die in war, and our youth cry out for compassion and justice while those in power seek to shut them up; in this particular moment the message I heard felt almost new. Stirring in me was this thought: God who IS love - sent LOVE to the world - so that we might ourselves BECOME love - IN the world.

And that is exactly what this passage from John is all about. Jesus gives us what the Gospel writer, in earlier chapters, identified as a "new" commandment; that we love one another. I've always thought that was weird. How in the world was this a new idea? I can't believe that Jewish law had said nothing about caring for others. Maybe folks had simply forgotten or lost track of that expectation. A New Testament professor named Osvaldo Vena (Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary) makes a really important observation about this "new" commandment. He points out that the writer of the Gospel of John interprets this commandment by intentionally excluding the words of institution for the Lord's Supper and replacing it with the washing of the disciples' feet. The last supper is referred to, but the act of washing another's feet takes center stage. That becomes the image of how one is to love.

And here's what I found to be the most powerful part of this professor's words. He ends his consideration of this new commandment by saying this: "I often wonder what the church would look like if its distinctive sign would have been the towel and the basin rather than the cross and the empty tomb. Instead of redemptive suffering" says Vena "— which has justified so much bloodshed ... we would have love, the giving of oneself for the other."

A phrase from this passage leapt out at me this week and helped me look at this oh so familiar teaching in a new way. It is a phrase of three simple words: I chose you! Jesus says “I chose you and I gave you a job to go and produce a love that will last. All you have to do is look at how I have done it” he says “and then do your best to do the same.”

The problem is, it's not as easy a job as it might sound. Jesus says “As the Father (Mother, Holy One) has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. But let's be real. God's love for Jesus put Jesus in some precarious situations. Think about it...

God's love sent Jesus to face the dangers of a divided world.

God's love sent Jesus to show unconditional love to everyone.

God's love sent Jesus to challenge power and call out pretenders.

God's love sent Jesus to lay down his very life; to lose everything to save everyone.

It was not a smiley face, heart emoji, kind of love. It was, and is, a love that abides in all kinds of situations; those that are joyful and those that are full of grief. It was, and is a love wider than any definition or description we could ever imagine. And this is the love that Jesus invites us to joyfully remain within.

In December of 2020 the Middle Collegiate Church, host of the conference I attended, lost their 128 year old church to a fire. The vacant building next door caught on fire and it spread to the church destroying the entire building, as well as a shelter for single women coming out of prison that stood next to the church. Staff and church members were devastated. They were crushed that their beloved sanctuary had burned, but their response across the board was that “no fire can stop the Revolutionary Love of God.”

A picture speaks a thousand words, so let me share a few images with you that tell their story better than I could...[Video of Middle Collegiate].

How do we give ourselves to one another in love to help each other rise from the ashes when life seems to burn it all down?

How do we give ourselves to one another in love when hope is hard to come by and hardship is easy pickins?

Here's the thing, there IS no right way to do it. Each one of us has to figure out for ourselves what that love will look like, but the scripture clearly says that THAT is how we come into our joy. We wake up each morning acknowledging the same truth and asking the same question. We acknowledge that we have been chosen to love, and we ask ourselves “now how am I going to manage that today?”

Jesus has chosen us to give of ourselves in service to one another by embodying a love that is bold. A love that is honest. A love that can withstand even the most difficult of situations. May we give ourselves to such love. Amen.