

LOVE ONE ANOTHER
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April 24, 2016
Fifth Sunday in Eastertide
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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John 13:31-35

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

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Lately I've been spending time in my office with six couples from our congregation who are planning weddings—two in May; one in June; one in July; two in October. Those sessions are happy times.

But it's not always a happy time in my office. Recently someone outside our congregation came to see me with an unhappy problem.

That person was in despair. He felt totally and completely hopeless. The world, he said, was an utter and complete mess. Nothing seemed to be working out right. Everything was getting worse by the day. And he was ready to call it quits.

I listened to a long litany of gloom—from the desecration of the earth to bigotry out of the mouth of presidential candidates to pernicious racism and cold apathy on the part of many. His long lament ended with this:

I'd like to believe in a god that will save of us from this mess, but I don't and I can't. Religious people just seem to make things worse.

I felt like saying, Amen.

But why was he pouring out his heart to a religious person like me? Well, as it turned out, he didn't think of me as *religious*, at least not in that way. And I guess that's a compliment.

So-called religious people reek with certainty and often have pat answers for everything. *Just believe and all will be well. It's God's will. Just accept it. Why worry when you can pray? Keep your chin up. All things work together for good. Really?*

Religious people can say a lot of right things, including *we will love God with all our hearts and love our neighbors as ourselves* and then turn around and do the opposite. I know I do. And as much as I want to be hopeful for myself and the world, it's not always easy.

So I found myself agreeing with this dejected, deflated and despairing soul.

I, too, feel hopeless, I told him. So, what can we do?

To which he replied, *what can WE do? I thought your job was to give us hope!*

And that made me feel even more hopeless for how can anyone give another hope when the world looks that grim, that dark? I can't fix hopelessness.

I could have said to him what Dorothy Day said: *No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to be done.* That's one of my favorite aphorisms and I quote it often.

But you know what? Sometimes all we can do is sit down and feel hopeless.

With apologies to Dorothy Day, no one has the right to tell another: *You don't have the right to feel hopeless*. At least not until we've sat in that same hopelessness for a while. Not until we've felt the world as the other feels it.

And so that's what we did. We sat feeling hopeless together like Jesus feeling forsaken on the cross. No god rushed in to rescue Jesus from his suffering. There was nothing there for him but unending love—Mary and the other women keeping vigil, weeping at the foot of the cross.

And so I sat in silence weeping with my friend.

After a little while, I told him how once when I was down and out, 42 years ago, when all I had counted on for my life was lost and I was ready to give up, I heard these words: *A lot of good work can be done with a broken heart*.

It didn't say I had to do good work. It just said, good work could be done. It wasn't a command. It was an invitation. And somehow, somehow that lifted me up 42 years ago.

My friend and I sat a while longer in silence. Then he got up, gave me a hug and left.

I don't know if my job is to give hope to the hopeless. But I do know my job, and your job, is to be with others and to listen with all our hearts. *Hearing the question is more important than finding the answer*.

No, we can't fix the world; but we can love one another. And as best I can tell, that's where God comes in, or that's where God is all the time. Actually, I don't even know if God is the right word for it. That sounds like we know more than we do. After all, it all is really and truly a mystery.

Besides, even if you get the name of God right, if it's not love, then it doesn't mean a thing.

We can't know for sure. But we can trust. We trust that something greater than ourselves makes us whole. Something greater than ourselves brings us back from the dead time and time again when we love one another.