

From the very beginning of time God has reached out to us with love. We have been given a world filled with incredible beauty; even the snow which we grumble about creates scenes of beauty. When we strayed from God’s plan and insisted that we be in control envy and violence entered the world and turned brother against brother. Still God reached out in love providing a series of laws to enable us to reclaim God’s plan and know God’s amazing love. When we turned from the gift of the law God sent the prophets to call us back. In today’s reading from Jeremiah God promises that God is creating a new relationship with us that will be based not upon external rules, but a law written upon our heart. God is not willing to give up on us despite our tendency to ignore his plan for us to in loving relationship with God and one another. A plan which was summarized in two commandments. The first being that: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind (Matthew 22:37.” The second being: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39).

Jesus came and sacrificed in an agonizing death upon the cross so that we might know that we are loved by God, forgiven and welcomed as a beloved child of God so that we might be able to enter a relationship with God based not upon mandatory rules, but love. Love which would become for us a law written upon our hearts. A love which is amazing when we reflect upon the fact that the very presence of God in the person of Jesus Christ became flesh and blood. The very Son of God entered in this world of ours in human form subject to the temptations and suffering that are part of daily life.

He was born into a nation whose people were occupied by the Roman Empire. A nation that glorified: violence, blood sports, gluttony, and immorality. Any who opposed its rule were dealt with swiftly and violently. Even God’s chosen people had forgotten God’s ways as proclaimed in the laws and teachings of the prophets. Even the religious leaders had fallen victims of the temptations of the world. They had become obsessed with clinging to what power and influence Rome had granted them in return for their cooperation. Faced with such widespread evil there were those among the Hebrew people who retreated from society to the caves located near the Dead Sea to escape society’s evil and await the end times and God’s day of judgment. Some believe that John the Baptist may have been a member of this community who came to the Jordon River to call the people turn away from the evil so prevalent in their world and be washed clean by God’s love.

John prepared the way for Jesus’ message of the need for a total rejection of the evil so prevalent in the world. Jesus would begin his ministry by choosing to read and comment on Isaiah that he had come not to serve those in positions of power and influence but to proclaim that the day of God’s favor for the poor, prisoner, and sick. If one wanted to be truly alive, to know God’s amazing love, one needed to be willing to let go of everything even life. For those who are willing to truly say no to anything that is contrary to God’s will and follow the way of Jesus will find a love that defies popular definition of love.

When Martin Luther King was willing to embrace God’s way of love to protest discrimination not with hatred and violence but with non-violence, risk, and ultimately lose his earthly life he was able to bring hope and progress to those oppressed for generations. When Mother Theresa reached out in love to those dying in the gutters of Calcutta she touched the lives not just of those she cared but became a source of inspiration to many. Throughout the history of Christianity there have been those who have embraced Jesus’ way of love and made an impact on this world. But it is not just the giants of faith who we call Saints who make an impact upon this world of ours; it is the multitude of those who respond to Christ’s call who are making an impact. It is the person who visits a person who is ill in the hospital or a shut-in and reminds them that they are a precious child of God of infinite worth. It is the people at the Free Lunch program who offers a hot meal to a needy individual with a smile and a word of welcome. It is the teacher who in the aftermath of a school shooting comforts her frightened students. It is you and me when we are willing to let go of everything that prevents us from hearing and responding to the ministry we are called to perform in Jesus’ name. It is each of when we dare to believe that when we follow Jesus that nothing will be able to separate us from his love, not even death itself. It is each of us when in the midst of difficult times we dare to believe that God will enable all things to work together for good. It is each of us when we are willing to say Yes Lord Yes to the words of our song of commitment. “Will you come and follow [Jesus] if [he] but call your name?”

I am convinced that if each of us gathered here this morning took that commitment seriously and said yes with every ounce of our being that we will accomplish great things. Jesus’ disciples took that call seriously and launched a movement that has touched the lives of individuals in every country of our world. It was a commitment that resulted in the death of all the apostles and many of their followers; but it has transformed the world for the better. We are called to continue the ministry of Jesus that transforms existence into meaningful life, provides hope in the face of death, defeats hatred with love, inspires those with much to care for those with little, and breaks down walls that divide us.