

Reflections in Solitude — Week 8

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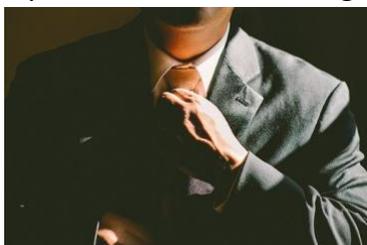
*“This is my commandment,
that you love one another as I have loved you.”
(John 15:12)*

As we enter step one of the three-stage reopening of our country, we begin to experience small signs of recovery. Some are cuddling grandchildren for the first time in many weeks. We see individuals sitting at tables outside cafés again despite the cool autumn air. And in some instances, face-to-face gatherings bring a welcome relief from the internet platforms on which we’ve come to rely.

As we take this small step, we recognise it remains an unknown territory. Like businesses and organisations across our country, churches are wondering what the future will hold at the end of the pandemic. How will these months leave us?

There has been a lot of adaptation and experimentation in recent weeks. We have used imagination and flexibility to nurture our faith and care for one another. For us at St. Andrews, necessity has also invited us to embrace opportunities and relationships in new ways through the Emergency Relief Services. Crisis has truly been a fertile mixture of danger and opportunity.

While I welcome some of the new ways of doing things, it occurs to me that today’s so-called innovations can easily become tomorrow’s lifeless forms. In other words, newness can initiate a kind of energy that has the potential to hide the fact that we are, in reality, remaining *our same-old-selves*. It is much like when we buy a new outfit that brings pleasure and helps us feel good about ourselves for a time but does nothing to change the reality of the body it covers!



In contrast, what the Gospel seems to be after is a complete transformation. Experiences like the one we’re currently moving through have the potential to lead us on the *inner journey* where we encounter God’s love and are shaped by it. We are invited to enter courageously into the mysterious way of dying and rising walked by Jesus that is both the work and hope of the Christian life. It is a lifelong journey, a continually unmaking and remaking for the sake of love.



On first hearing, Jesus’ command to love may seem incongruent. It might jar a bit. After all, the word “commandment” could suggest a prerequisite or legalism that doesn’t rest easily with the uncoerced, free-flowing nature of God’s unconditional love. How can love that is genuine be demanded of us?

But what if we place the emphasis on the second part of this verse, that is, that we are to love *as Jesus loves us*? This may not resolve everything, but it does point out the origin and kind of love we are invited to embody. It opens the door to the possibility that what we are called to is a particular quality of loving that is itself a grace which we must first experience if it is to flow from us.

In Jesus’ farewell address, we hear that by the Spirit of Christ, God is *with us and in us*. We need not, then, generate the will to love nor simply try harder to be loving for the very Source of Love dwells within us. Our part is simply to receive what is already there, on offer, every day. Making the inner journey through reflective practices like prayer and meditation enables us to discover this Source and remain connected to it, allowing love to flow from us more readily and consistently.

Also, because this Source is in all and through all, the aim of Christian love may be different as well. In my experience, sometimes our ways of relating to and loving others are not reflective of this “in and through all” truth we profess.

For example, this week I was speaking with someone who came into church during the Emergency Relief time. In a previous conversation, he mentioned in passing his discomfort at times since it is not in his nature to receive something without working for it. I decided to take this thread up again with him, wishing to apologise if we unintentionally put him in a place of indignity. I explained, “You are going through a rough patch right now. When your situation changes, you can help someone in return.” To which he immediately responded, “Well, I am already able to help.”

Indeed! He, like all people and all creation, is full of the Spirit of God. Each of us can love and contribute, in our own way, out of this abundant wellspring.

His word to me was prophetic. For in our exchange, I heard again how our relating must attempt to convey this vision of the Trinity of Love dwelling in all. Such a perspective invites us to go beyond the view of a common humanity—which is valuable—to consider the very goal and nature of our interactions.

Might it be that Christ-like love seeks to dissolve, bit-by-bit, the barriers that exist between us—barriers that often maintain systems of division, disparity, injustice and harm? Might the overarching aim of love be to reveal and strengthen the Holy Tie that holds creation in an interconnected whole?

I say, yes. And I wonder what my developing conviction will mean for me—and perhaps for us—as we continue to move with the Spirit into an unknown yet promising landscape.

A familiar poem by Welsh poet–priest, R. S. Thomas that draws a compelling picture of the Kingdom we are invited to seek. He notes that inside it “there are quite different things going on,” which reminds us of the counter cultural nature of the Gospel’s call.

The Kingdom

by R. S. Thomas

It’s a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It’s a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

