

**Living as Easter People: Resurrection for the Rest of Us
Now What? 4-19-09**

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

John 20:19-31 ¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Last Sunday we gathered together with brass and fanfare as we celebrated Easter - the day of resurrection - the event of God's triumph of life over death. It was a grand and glorious celebration and we were witnesses to the baptism of three young people who now have Easter 2009 as their re-birthday. Last Sunday, we heard the story from the gospel of Mark; a story with an abrupt ending that begs us to be participants in living out the resurrection. In that telling of the story, the man at the empty tomb told the women that they would see Jesus in Galilee just as Jesus had told them. But you may remember that the women were seized by terror and amazement and said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

Our story today picks up where we left off last week, except it comes from the gospel according to John instead of Mark. None-the-less, fear is very much a part of the story. It is the evening of the resurrection and the disciples are hold up in a locked house because they were afraid. All of a sudden, Jesus is standing there in the midst of them, showing them the wounds on his hands and his side, and

saying, "Peace be with you...just as God sent me, so I send you." This is just what they were waiting for, right - a sign that what Jesus had been telling them all along had come to pass and directions on what to do next. Why, then, do you suppose that a week later when Jesus returned to show Thomas his wounds they are still hold up in the house behind closed doors? Do you suppose they were still afraid to act - to do as Jesus had asked them, indeed, sent them to do? Thomas is always the one who gets a bad wrap in this story, but he was not there for Jesus' first appearance, so he has an excuse. The others do not. In fact, in his first appearance to the disciples Jesus breathed on them, offering to them the Holy Spirit that would empower them to continue the work he'd begun. And a week later, they are still in the same place.

The question for us, as disciples of Christ in the aftermath of the resurrection, is, "now what?" Okay, so Jesus suffered and died and rose again. We celebrate that every year. And we dress up and we come to church and we eat delicious meals with family and friends. But

what difference does that make in my life, in your life, in our life as a community of faith, in the world? What changes in light of that new reality? How do we live as Easter people and take hold of the power of the resurrection so that we can continue the work Jesus began? Jesus' resurrection was not primarily about where we go after we die. It was primarily about how we live in this life. So how do we seize life and hope and love - the kind that changes lives and heals wounds and breaks down barriers and overcomes fear, and honors God?

My daughter, Hannah, wrote a song called "Afraid." The refrain goes like this, "Don't be afraid 'cause fear it gets us nowhere. Fear causes blindness and it gets us nowhere, gets us nowhere fast." The last verse of the song talks about how it is that religion sometimes tries to scare us into doing the right thing so we can get a reward. In that verse, Hannah writes, "But shouldn't I be doing good out of the kindness of my heart and not for a reward in the afterlife. So I'll be spending my time learning how to live, not learning how not to die. Learning how to live, not learning how not to die."

Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundant. That is not only in the afterlife, it is now. As we are empowered by the Holy Spirit, as we live by Jesus' example and teachings, we experience resurrection and life and we participate in answering Jesus' prayer, our prayer, that God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." But that doesn't happen if we are afraid. It doesn't happen if we hold up in the church building or in our homes afraid of what might happen if we really take hold of life in Christ.

The other night, my husband, Tim, and I watched the movie, Yes Man with Jim Carrey. Carrey plays a man named Carl. Carl lives his life in the large shadow of his wounds of having been left by his wife three years earlier. He's afraid of being hurt again, so Carl has become a bit of a recluse. He has closed himself off from relationships and new experiences and from taking any kind of risk. He's a terrible friend, a loan officer without a heart, and a person who has turned totally inward in an attempt to keep from being vulnerable or disappointed.

Carl is basically afraid to live, which means he is depressed and lonely and has nothing to hope for.

One day, Carl runs into an old acquaintance who has been traveling the world and who is full of energy and life and ready to risk. This man tells Carl that he has changed his life by becoming a Yes Man. Carl, as usual, is disinterested, but the friend gives him a brochure on an upcoming seminar that can teach Carl how to be a Yes Man, too. After resisting all he can, Carl finally shows up and makes a covenant to become a Yes Man - meaning he will say yes to every opportunity that presents itself to him. He will say Yes to life.

On his way out of the auditorium Carl is approached by a homeless man who asks Carl for a ride. Carl, in his new life, and clearly with a bit of the old lingering, pauses and then says, "Sure." As they ride together, the homeless man asks Carl if he can use his cell phone to make a call. "Okay." As the man gets out of the car, he asks Carl if he has a couple of dollars to spare and Carl pulls out his money, about to give the man a few dollars, when the man asks, "Hey, do you want to

give it all to me." Carl grits his teeth, gives all his money to the man, and says, "Sure."

This is just the beginning of Carl's new life. Each time he says Yes, it leads Carl into a new set of circumstances that connect him to people in new and life-enhancing ways. Carl becomes a new person. Now, instead of saying no to those in need of a loan, he says Yes. He becomes very popular because he is now making hundreds of micro-loans which enable poor people to get a new start on life and is actually good for the bank business, so he gets promoted. The more he reaches out and connects to the needs of others; the more Carl stops living for himself; the more Carl seizes the goodness of life, the more fulfilled his life becomes. Whereas before, Carl's wounds made him bitter and depressed, now, they make him better and more able to seize the depth of meaning and relationship that comes from connecting with the wounds of others. That's "Learning how to live, not learning how not to die." Carl was living resurrection. It did make a difference. It is real.

The disciples were hold up in a house because of fear. They had their wounds, having witnessed their leader executed on a cross, having failed Jesus by denying and betraying him. Fear had seized them and immobilized them. But then Jesus visited them, and showed them his wounds. And their wounds connected with the wounds of Jesus and instead of remaining stuck in bitterness and despair they were able to rise up and become better; seizing life and hope and connecting with the wounds of others - a place where God could heal and transform and deepen relationships.

People were amazed when they saw what a different person Carl had become as a Yes Man. There was a real difference. Between now and the end of May with Pentecost, we will consider what a difference it makes to live as Easter people. Jesus came to show us true life, abundant life. As Easter people, we behave differently because the power of life and the resurrection has taken hold in our lives and in our gathering together as a faith community. Fear and wounds are a part of life, but when met by the risen Christ they become channels of

God's grace poured out for the sake of all. Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.

Living as Easter People: Resurrection for the Rest of Us
Caring for God's Creation 4-26-09
By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Acts 17:22-31 ²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him— though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ ²⁹Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

"For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies, for the love which from our birth over and around us lies, Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise." If you ask people when they have felt closest to God, most will probably tell you about a time when they were out in nature. Maybe when taking in a beautiful view - a mountain or the ocean; maybe when watching a sunrise or sunset; maybe at church camp sitting around a fire singing. For me, it was in the Guatemalan rain forest at an ancient holy sight called Tikal. There in the midst of giant trees and howler monkeys, the sun rising over the tops of the trees and pyramid structures, God was present to me in such a powerful way it has left me wholly unable to speak of it adequately. None-the-less, when I think of that time, I can still feel the deep sense of awe and wonder as God's spirit filled me.

The Apostle Paul was in Athens, Greece. He looked around the city, and what he saw was not the wonder of God, but idols, lots of idols, and he became distressed. And when Paul is distressed, he kicks it into high gear and goes into debate mode. There in this great city, in

the synagogue as well as in the marketplace, among the philosophers and teachers and leaders and anyone who will listen or engage with him. In this moment, Paul stands at the great high point - the Areopagus - looks around at the idols of stone and gold and silver and offers a counter point to it all as he proclaims the good news of Jesus' resurrection and tries to help people understand the nature of the one true God, maker of heaven and earth... the one in whom we live and move and have our being. God, says Paul, does not live in shrines, cannot be contained in a box or a statue, or even a temple or church. Rather, it is God who gives life and breath to all creation and is connected to creation itself. We do not create God. Rather God creates and gives life to all things, including us.

One way we live as Easter people; one way we express the new life that we have because Christ lives in us is to care for and love God's creation of which we are a part. This should come naturally to people of faith. In the first story of creation in Genesis we read about how God created the heavens and the earth and the light and the waters

and the animals and the plants and pronounced it good. And then God created us humans, in God's own image, to care for and keep; to be fruitful and multiply and that was VERY good.

The problem is, we have not been doing a very good job of caring for creation. We have mismanaged this tremendous resource we have been given, in part because we have lost the long view. We have come through a time in history when everything happened so fast - lifestyle improvements, new technologies, conveniences, and the like - that we have not stepped back enough and asked what would be the consequences of living like there was no tomorrow. And the result is we are destroying this most precious gift from God, and the future doesn't look so great for our children and grandchildren. So as people who live in light of the resurrection, it is time we wake up and take our responsibility to heal and restore the earth seriously, that we might honor and love the Creator, the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

One of the reasons we have gotten away from our role as caregivers of creation is that at some point we came to see God as some entity "out there," distant and far away. And we began to see God's creation as something we possess; something which we have the right to do with as we please for our own pleasure and gratification regardless of the consequences. But as today's passage suggests, and as the Psalm declares, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it..." As people of faith, we must understand that we are here, not to possess, not to abuse or misuse, but to care for God's creation formed in abundance for the blessing of all.

About a year ago, some people here at First Christian Church got together because they care about God's creation and wanted to think together about how we, as a faith community, might take our caretaker job seriously. That small group has grown and decided to call itself Earth 101... maybe because we are in a college town, but certainly out of a sense of passion for and responsibility to the healing and

restoring of the precious gift we have been given. The Earth 101 group has been coming up with ideas and has begun to take some actions. Maybe you've read about some of these in the newsletter. We've entered a contest to see if we can reduce the carbon footprint of the church by becoming more energy efficient, using less or re-using resources. We are investigating alternatives to some of our cleaning products, the paper we use, trying to turn off lights and cut down on waste.

Yesterday, First Christian hosted a "Cool Congregations" workshop where we learned about how individuals within the congregation can reduce their carbon footprint and take small steps that will not only save resources, but save money as well. There were people here from about 5 or 6 other congregations in Ames. We all learned a lot about what a difference we can make and how it is that our faith compels us to care enough to act. Over the next several months, you will be hearing about and seeing signs that we are continuing to do what we can, both as individuals and as a church to use

resources wisely and to do things in a way that keeps in mind our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Each one of us can be part of this effort. If you have an idea, let me or one of the Earth 101 group know. If you'd like to be part of the group, talk to Don Gustofson or Doug Sumerford.

God cannot be contained in a box. God does not live in a shrine. The God we worship is Lord of heaven and earth, the one who gives life and breath, the one in whom we live and move and have our being; not some distant deity, but the one who is in our midst, continually breathing life and hope and love and renewal and healing into the fabric of creation that we may all experience resurrection and abundant life. The God we worship is made known in the wind blowing through the trees and in the beauty of the mountains and in the rolling waves of the ocean and in the song of the lark and in the silence of the forest and in the seed beneath the soil and in the bulb of the flower. The God we worship is made known in the cry of a newborn baby and the touch of one who cares and in the joining of hearts and hands and voices in

thanksgiving for the beauty and bounty and awesomeness of creation.

And we express our love for the God of life as we care for all that God created and pronounced good. We have been blessed so greatly, and we have a great responsibility. Let's join together as Easter people to care for God's creation, to heal and restore and renew the face of the earth to the glory of God. Amen.

Living as Easter People: Resurrection for the Rest of Us
God's Economic Stimulus 5-3-09
By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Matthew 6:19-21 ¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:25-34 ²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

For a long time now, the news has been that we are having an economic crisis. And when I say "we" I guess I don't mean just the United States. It seems this is a global crisis. There is some kind of ripple effect going out across the world. Banks and corporations, Wall Street, the Dow Jones, NASDAQ, the auto industry, pensions and the like have lost a tremendous amount of value. People everywhere are having to tighten their belt, so to speak, in order to meet the challenge of shrinking resources. Many people are losing their jobs, budget cuts are going on in all sectors of business and non-profit organizations. We're trying to learn how to do more with less. We're having to think a bit more deeply about what is important and get creative to keep things going. That's true here at the church as well. We're all connected and we're all in this together. I guess that's the good news.

The thing is, as this whole crisis has unfolded, some important truths have been uncovered, like rampant greed and unprincipled, business practices, and overreaching spending on the "good life." And so we find ourselves angry or disgusted - maybe pointing our finger at

who we think is to blame or maybe just throwing our hands up in the air. But this might just be a moment for all of us to step back and take a look at who we've become and who the economy is serving and how the whole thing fits or doesn't fit with what our faith tells us about the place of money and possessions and what drives our actions in our lives. Maybe this is exactly the right time to draw on the resources of our faith to see our way into a different kind of economy. Maybe our economy can be resurrected in a way that brings back the humanity and "for the good of all" element that seems to have been lacking as of late.

Jesus had a lot to say about economics. The gospels are full of his teachings and stories on the subject. God, it would seem, had the notion of economic stimulus long before Bush and Obama. So let's take a look, shall we? Our scripture for today comes from Jesus' sermon on the mount. That sermon - which you'll find in chapters 5 through 7 of Matthew - is Jesus' quintessential sermon. If you asked me for just one place where you could get a glimpse at the crux of Jesus'

teachings, I'd tell you to read Jesus' sermon on the mount. Anyway, Jesus offers a couple of perspectives on money and possessions in the passage I read.

Jesus reminds people that money and possessions are not what is primary in life. Those things, at least in God's view, are not what give a person worth. Concerning oneself with what you will eat and drink and wear doesn't contribute to the length or quality of your life. Rather, that comes from putting first things first and focusing on the bigger purposes in life, seeking the kingdom of God. When you focus on what is important, the other things just follow. This is the kind of thing that is important for us to remember in a time such as this. This is not a time to shrink back in fear of the economic crisis. This is not a time to become tight fisted and hold on to what little we have. Rather, this is a time to make sure we use the resources we have for good; to enhance life not just for ourselves, but for the sake of others as well.

Recently I was at a clergy gathering here in Ames. Mike Fritz, the Director of Good Neighbor, was our guest. Mike reported that in

this terrible economic downturn two things have happened. One, as you might imagine, the number of people needing help has increased dramatically. But two, as you might not have imagined, the number of people contributing to this worthy cause is not going down and has even increased some. That's what you call *God's economic stimulus*. People whose hearts are full of gratitude for what they do have wanting to give to make life a little better for those who are struggling more than they are.

Another perspective on *God's economic stimulus plan* Jesus offers has to do with the issue of money and character. Jesus says "where you treasure is, there your heart will be also." Some people think this is backwards. Doesn't Jesus mean that you put your money where your heart is? But just think about it for a minute. Jesus is actually just describing the way it is, not the way "it should be." Our heart tends to follow our treasure. If you give your money to something, you have a stake in that thing. You are invested in it. You pay attention to it. It influences what you do and how you think.

Many years ago when I was a college student I spent one summer as a door-to-door canvasser for a Senate candidate. The point of going door to door was to help people become more familiar with the candidate's name and maybe something about where they stood on the issues. Part of my job, however, was to ask each person I spoke with for a small donation. The idea was the same as Jesus' words; if a person actually gave even a dollar to this person's campaign, they would have a stake, an investment in this person which would likely result in a vote later on. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Think about your treasure for a minute. You might discover something about where your heart is by analyzing where your money goes. More and more people are paying attention to that and wanting to do things like support local shops and businesses, locally grown food, or things grown or made ethically in terms of caring for people and the earth. We have a gift shop downtown called *Worldly Goods* filled with gifts made in countries around the world in a way that treats workers fairly and which helps them rise out of poverty. When I was in

Guatemala a few years back, I visited an organic coffee growing coop. The local farmers grew the coffee in a way that did not use toxic chemicals, but preserved the land. It also brought a living wage to the workers who grew and picked the coffee. These people's lives have been totally changed because people of faith decided to invest their treasure in a way that brought God's love and healing and care to people in need. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Another aspect of God's economic stimulus is the principle that when we give for the sake of others, for the sake of the common good; when we give up our tendency to be selfish and self-serving, we don't just add, we multiply. This principle is demonstrated in the story of Jesus feeding the 5000. In that classic story, Jesus is out on a hillside preaching and teaching to the crowd. The disciples ask Jesus if he wouldn't want to wrap things up and dismiss the crowd since it is getting close to supper time and clearly there is not enough to feed this big crowd. Jesus says, "Nice try." "You give them something to eat." "But, Jesus these are times of scarce resources. We don't have

enough... just 5 loaves and 2 fish. That's not going to feed all these people!" But Jesus can see this is one of those defining moments. This is one of those opportunities to teach by example. If Jesus and the disciples send people away because there is not enough, what are they saying about God and their faith in God's abundant grace and love and provision... "consider the lilies of the field." In this moment, these people of faith must rise above the fear and give generously

Jesus knows that God's economic stimulus is based on the idea of multiplication, and so he blesses the food and breaks the bread and sets it before the disciples. And guess what... there was enough for everyone to eat with leftovers. Five plus two does not equal seven...it is multiplied many times over as people catch the spirit of generosity and each gives what they have and shares with their neighbor and all are filled and none go away hungry. And the message of Jesus and the kingdom of God is made real.

Research shows that once the basic needs of a person are met, their quality of life and their happiness does not necessarily go up by

having more money and more possessions. In fact, at a point, the more you have the less likely you are to be happy and feel fulfilled.

Happiness and prosperity come, says Jesus, by living life in relationship with God and God's purposes, in loving one another, and being generous with the blessings we have received. In the economy of God, we invest in the things that serve to enhance life and love and hope and healing. In the economy of God, we put living as God's beloved children, as ones who understand the values and dreams of God ahead of worrying about the more surface concerns. And in the economy of God, less is more and in giving you receive and in losing you find and in being last you are first. So let's put our money where our values are. Let's give with glad and generous hearts, sharing God's love and bounty with those in need. Let's encourage sharing and see how God's multiplication happens. Let's set a new standard for economic growth through generosity and caring about neighbors and strangers. Let's make real the kingdom of God. What have we got to lose? Amen.

Living as Easter People: Resurrection for the Rest of Us
The New World Order: God, Neighbor, Self
5-10-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Luke 10:25-37 ²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."
²⁸And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."
²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"
³⁰Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.
³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.
³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.
³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.
³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.
³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'
³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"
³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

What a great story?! It is probably one of the most beloved stories of Jesus. When we hear the phrase "Good Samaritan" we probably get a warm, fuzzy feeling inside. The good Samaritan is the hero in Jesus' parable. To be called a good Samaritan is a compliment. The priest and the Levite walked right on by that man who was beaten and left for dead. It was the Samaritan who went above and beyond the call of duty to make sure the man was cared for. That poor, beaten man owed his life to the Samaritan.

This story reminds us that we want to be the Samaritan, the hero of the story, not the religious people who didn't show compassion. As ones who claim to be Christian, we certainly want to be like the Samaritan. We don't want people telling stories about how we failed to show mercy and help someone in need. But that is only one part of a more complex story. In order to understand this story, we must know a little more about the context out of which it comes.

Luke tells us a lawyer decides he's going to see what this Jesus is really made of. "People think Jesus is so smart, so knowledgeable, I'll

just have to see." By definition, a test means the person asking the question already has or at least thinks they have the answer. And so the lawyer asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus understands what's going on here, so he turns it around and asks the lawyer a legal question. "What is written in the law?" The lawyer answers, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." "Great," says Jesus, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

By nature, lawyers are legalistic. They want to define terms precisely. "Okay, love God and my neighbor as myself, got it,...but who is my neighbor?" Remember, this was a lawyer putting Jesus to the test and trying to "win" an argument. He assumed a neighbor, of course, is someone close to you; someone in your group, friends, family, tribe, religious community, ones like you. Asking, "who is my neighbor" was a way to prove his own worthiness. This lawyer knew what he had to do to be right with God. He knew scripture. He knew the religious

practices - the what, when and how of things. And he knew how to shine in public and display his goodness before others. But he didn't know Jesus very well. Jesus knew the power of a good story. And so Jesus begins, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho..."

Presumably, the man left for dead was a Jew. And the first two people to come upon this unfortunate man were also Jews. In fact, they were religious leaders, righteous ones under the law just like the lawyer and Jesus himself. The priest and the Levite, we are told, pass by on the other side. They do not help this man. They probably have very legitimate, religious reasons to pass by. Purity laws would prohibit contact with someone dying. These temple leaders needed to be clean so they could perform the religious rituals and stay in compliance with the law. It's not necessarily that they were bad or unfeeling. But their circumstance made it impractical for them to respond.

A priest, a Levite, ... and... Jesus' hearers would be expecting a Jewish layperson to be the third and climactic character. Three people or situations are often found in stories of that period *and* our own - in

our time it would be a priest, a rabbi and a protestant minister. So Jesus begins, a priest, a Levite and ... (drum roll, please), a Samaritan?! That can't be right. Samaritans were hated in Jesus' day. To call someone a Samaritan was to hurl an insult at them. Samaritans and Jews descended from the same line, but at some point along the way, they parted. The Samaritans were considered half-breeds and heretics. They believed in the Torah, but not the rest of the Hebrew scripture. And their center of worship was not in Jerusalem as it was for the Jews. There were bad feelings between these two groups... maybe like Israelis and Arabs in Palestine. So when Jesus finishes his story in response to "and who is my neighbor," by saying a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan, and it is the Samaritan who turns out to be the example of a neighbor, you can imagine how angry that lawyer must have been. He couldn't even say the word Samaritan. When Jesus asked him who was the neighbor, the lawyer only said, "The one who showed mercy on him." And Jesus told this lawyer to go and do likewise... go be like the *Samaritan* in this story.

The story of the good Samaritan isn't just about how important it is to show mercy and compassion. It is also a story redefining who and how we relate to one another. This is a story that shows a different way of living and ordering our lives. God's new order that puts loving God and loving neighbor in the same breath, recognizing that we love God as we love our neighbor and our neighbor is anyone and everyone we come in contact with. And this is so Jesus!

Jesus defied conventions about who and how to relate to people. He was often in trouble for mixing with the wrong crowd. He ate with sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes as well as Pharisees and scribes and lawyers. Jesus raised the bar and set a new standard for what is important and this story of the good Samaritan and this lawyer illustrate it so well.

Jesus turned a legalistic question about who is my neighbor into a character statement on what it means to *be* a neighbor. Jesus didn't have much use for legalism. He came to demonstrate a higher standard... one from the heart. The lawyer was interested in being

right before the law; in doing what he needed to do to gain a reward.

Jesus was interested in love and service to those whom God loves, understanding that is a reward in itself - that is abundant life.

We tend to put people in categories in a way that creates outsiders and insiders. And then we define ourselves, in part, by the fact that we are not like "those" people who are the outsiders, the people with whom we disagree, the people who represent what we dislike or are against. And Jesus comes along and says God has other ideas. There is a better way; a way of abundant living; a way to tap into eternity. The way doesn't come from legalism or worrying about a reward. Abundant life begins as we love God with heart, soul, strength and mind and our neighbor as ourselves. And who is our neighbor? Anyone we come in contact with even a stranger - even an enemy.

Have you ever seen the movie, *Chocolat*? It takes place in a French village some years ago. The magistrate of the small village is an upright man. He lives a disciplined life. He goes to church. He doesn't do things he shouldn't. He wants everyone in his village to be upright,

too. He wants everyone to have the kind of discipline he does and to follow the rules for good living. Everyone, of course, must go to church, and he expects the town priest to preach his brand of religion which is pretty legalistic and rigid. The priest is not legalistic and rigid, so the magistrate takes it upon himself to tweak the priest's sermons each week, just trying to "help."

One day, a woman and her daughter move to town and open up a chocolate shop. This woman is not married. She is a free spirit. And she opens up a Chocolate Shop in the middle of town during Lent, no less! This woman befriends the misfits, she gives to anyone who is in need, she saves a woman from her abusive husband and almost ends up hurt herself, she treats everyone with care and respect. But the magistrate believes she is a bad influence on the town. She doesn't go to church. She encourages people to eat chocolate during Lent! And she associates with the people who live on a boat on the river... clearly people who are unworthy, unclean - river rats, you know. But she befriends them, too. She is truly a neighbor to everyone she meets.

The magistrate works hard to get the townspeople to shun her. The climax of the movie comes as the magistrate realizes that he is losing control and that some of his attempts to keep things in order have actually resulted in hurting people which was not his intent. And he begins to see that this woman whom he has shunned and put down and tried to drive out of town is, in the end, more of a neighbor, more of a person of grace and love and faith than he is. Shamed by this realization, he breaks into her chocolate shop and ravages the chocolate. She finds him in the store window, passed out, the next morning. She could have embarrassed him. She could have scolded him. She could have made an example of him to the town. But instead, she was a neighbor to him as well. She helped him get cleaned up and home without drawing attention to him. Just like in the parable of the good Samaritan, it was the one thought to be the enemy who ends up being the neighbor. It was the one he targeted as other, as outside the group who taught him about grace and forgiveness. The magistrate saw a godless, unmarried mother who threatened his world order. And

instead she was the one God used her to teach him about the New World order that brings abundant life.

Who was the neighbor? - the one who showed mercy. Go and do likewise. Amen.

Living as Easter People: Resurrection for the Rest of Us
Joy in Three Parts 5-17-09
By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Philippians 4:4-9 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

I've Got the Joy

Since Easter we have been thinking about some of the characteristics of those who live abundantly in light of knowing that life is stronger than death and love stronger than hate and God is still active in our lives and in our living, healing and restoring and giving hope yet in our time. People who put their faith in the God who brought

forth life from death and in whose name we pray Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, allow that faith to show in both word and deed... in caring for the earth, in being generous in our giving, both of ourselves and our treasure, in caring for friends and strangers and enemies, all. You see, Jesus showed us a new way, a way that leads to abundant life. And when we follow in that way, it shows in what we do and in our attitude and in what we value.

You've probably heard the saying, "You may be the only Bible some people read." Well, today, we think about the spirit of life within us and that spirit is one of joy. Have you ever known someone who always had a positive attitude, someone who could see the silver lining in any cloud, not because they feared conflict or only allowed rose-colored glasses, but because there was an authentic joy and peace about them that was a bit contagious? We sang *I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy* down in my heart with the children this morning. When we are connected to the source of life, when we give our lives to something greater than ourselves, when we see the big picture of God's purposes

and the way we can contribute to that and hope in that, it does bring a joy and a peace that surpasses all understanding, even in the midst of trial and suffering, even in the midst of doubt and hardship. Joy runs deep and cannot be taken away.

Joy That Runs Deep

The joy that runs deep is what sustains us and allows us to carry on in those dark times in our lives, in times that are hard, in times of sorrow and grief, or anger and frustration, or in the face of injustice or whatever may befall us. Joy that runs deep taps into the root of life, the source, the river of life, the fount of blessing. It doesn't cover over the pain, but it does put it into perspective. It doesn't prevent trial and struggle, but it does give the strength to continue on in hope beyond hope.

In his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul wrote, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...No, ... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things

present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:35,38,39) Joy runs deep as we experience the strength of a living, loving relationship to God in Christ; a relationship that grounds us and guides us even when we find ourselves in times of trouble.

Where's the Joy at First Christian Church?

"Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?" Joy runs deep, but it is not hidden. Joy is made real, made manifest in our lives as we sing our songs and as we reach out in acts of love.

There is hope even in loss. Recently a couple of faithful members of First Christian Church have passed away; members who were joy-filled and who will be greatly missed. But as we gathered in this sanctuary to celebrate their lives, there in the midst of the tears and the hurting hearts was a deep joy because of the great blessing of their lives and the way each had touched our own. It is a joy to gather

together in the company of one another and in the presence of God's love to celebrate life, and to support one another in times of grief. We support one another by our presence and by providing food for the grieving family and sharing the stories and the laughter and the tears. In that there is joy and healing.

There is joy as quilters make blankets and quilts that we call "Warm Hugs" that are given to those who, for a myriad of reasons, need a warm hug... like the men who came here last winter and had no home and were cold, or the woman who came to town to flee her abusive husband and needed to feel that someone cared, or the church member who was thought to be gravely ill and in the hospital was wrapped in the warm love of this community.

There is joy in doing what we can to heal the earth God has so graciously blessed us with, and in celebrating the baptism of three young people this Easter, and in gathering together for worship, and in getting to know one another more deeply, and in new people in our midst, and in putting our money together to give food and gas vouchers

to those in need who have nowhere else to turn. The joy of our faith shines through as people find connection and hope.

There is joy when people of all shapes and sizes, all faiths, all socio-economic status', for all kinds of reasons come to this place on Thanksgiving Day each year to help prepare and to serve and to eat and to meet as friends and neighbors and strangers experiencing the love of God and the blessing of food and connection. And that joy lasts all year long. Just last week someone came in wanting to make sure we would still have the Thanksgiving dinner again this year.

We are an Easter people, living life abundant, not for ourselves, but in a way that Jesus taught us... a way that enhances life for everyone and even the earth itself. The refrain in the song we're about to sing proclaims, "Jesus lives again, earth can breathe again, pass the Word around: loaves abound!" Let us live in joy and thanksgiving as ones who are blessed as well as a blessing. Amen.

Living As Easter People: Resurrection for the Rest of Us
Love Rules! 5-24-09
5-24-09

I John 4:7-21 ⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. . .

¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and [God's] love is perfected in us. . .

¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their

Love is the topic of many songs ...

- ❖ "Oh can't you see what love has done." - *Window in the Skies*
- ❖ "All you need is love." - The Beatles
- ❖ "The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return." - *Nature Boy*

And in the Bible...

- ❖ "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... [and] your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." - Matthew 22:37,39,40
- ❖ "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." - I Corinthians 13:13
- ❖ "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." - I John 4:16b

Professor David Tracy of the University of Chicago says that "God is Love" is the central Christian metaphor. He also says that today, we don't appreciate how radical that notion is. When John wrote those three short words, "God is Love," putting forth that the way to understand Divine Reality is through love, that was in stark contrast to Greek or Roman understanding that intelligence provided the major clue for the nature of Divine Reality - intelligence, not love. "God is love" suggests relationship, not a God who is out there, above it all, in the heavens, but rather right here in and through all things; the very ground of our being; accessible to anyone and everyone.

There is a story that has been passed down about John, Jesus' beloved disciple, the one who wrote this letter of love. When John became an old man, deeply loved, deeply honored by his community, the time came when he could no longer walk to the meetings of the Church. He had to be carried there by his disciples. He always gave the same address to the church. He reminded them of that one commandment which he had received directly from Jesus, which encompassed all the other commandments and formed the distinction of the new covenant, "My little children, he would say, love one another." When the brothers and sisters in the church wearied of hearing the same thing spoken again and again, they asked, "Why do you always repeat the same thing?" And John replied, "Because it is the commandment of the Lord and if this one thing be attained, it is enough."

"God is love," and we know God as we love others because God is love. The meaning of existence begins and ends with love. And the rule of love Jesus came to teach and embody and demonstrate through his life and death includes the provision that there is no exception to the

rule. Jesus command to love includes the stranger and the enemy as well as friends and neighbors and family.

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of God in heaven; for God makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as God is perfect."

Jesus' raises the bar for those who would be his followers. Love is the basis upon which we live and act and that love is big just as God is big. Just as no one is outside the love of God, we are invited to extend the same attitude, the same orientation as God, and in so doing, we ourselves come to know God and experience God's love more fully.

The kind of love we're talking about here is not based on attraction or merit. The love that is God is much bigger and greater and farther reaching than that. It is love based on principle and character and strength of will. It is love that becomes a way of looking at others and the world. It is an orientation that embodies care and compassion and forgiveness and kindness and sacrifice independent of what is in it for us. Jesus knew the cost of such extravagant love. He went to the cross rather than back down from the message of love he was sent to share; that good news message of God's love poured out upon all.

Now, as then, the world is a place where hate and selfishness, greed and abuse of power are rampant. The gospel of Jesus - that love rules - is the antidote. Love, the love that is God, is the only thing stronger than the dark forces we must encounter in the world. Love is the only hope we have. Love is real and powerful and transcendent. Love is precisely what we need in these uncertain, changing times. It may be the only certain thing we have.

You want to hear something interesting about the power of love?

This is for the scientists among us. A couple of weeks ago I was visiting my daughter, Hannah, at Carleton College in Northfield, MN. As I was browsing in the bookstore, I came across a brand new book, hot off the press. It is called, How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist by Dr. Andrew Newburg and Mark Robert Waldman. In the book, the authors share brain research that shows how our spiritual practices and the way we see God actually changes our brains. According to the synopsis, contemplating a loving God strengthens portions of our brain -- particularly the frontal lobes and the anterior cingulate -- where empathy and reason reside. This helps counter some of our more destructive tendencies. Contemplating a wrathful God, on the other hand, empowers the limbic system, which is "filled with aggression and fear." Basically, the God we choose to love changes us into that image. Maybe that's why John kept preaching God is love. If we are the image of God and we worship a vengeful God, we become vengeful and our

brain actually loses some of its higher functioning. Whereas if we worship the God who is love, we increase our brain power in terms of our ability to reason and express compassion and an interest in the common good. The scientists are proving what Jesus taught and John preached. Fascinating!

The authors tell the Cherokee story of the two wolves a version of which I have shared before. It goes like this: Once upon a time, a young boy received a beautiful drum as a gift. When his best friend saw it, he asked if he could play with it, but the boy felt torn. He didn't want to share his new present, so he angrily told his friend, "No!" His friend ran away, and the boy sat down on a rock by the stream to contemplate his dilemma. He hated the fact that he had hurt his friend's feelings, but the drum was too precious to share. In his quandary, he went to his grandfather for advice.

The elder listened quietly and then replied. "I often feel as though there are two wolves fighting inside me. One is mean and greedy and full of arrogance and pride, but the other is peaceful and

generous. All the time they are struggling, and you, my boy, have those same two wolves inside of you." "Which one will win?" asked the boy.

The elder smiled and said, "The one you feed."

The authors use this story to illustrate the findings that suggest if you live in a mode of fear and judgment it actually affects your brain and inhibits your ability to use reason and other higher brain functions to address issues and solve problems and relate to those with whom you disagree because you are feeding the mean wolf. However, if you live out of love and feed the compassionate wolf your higher brain functions, the ones you need in order to respond to complex moral issues and problems, actually develops. Or, as John puts it, "God is love... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."

The whole of Christian faith comes down to this. God loves each one of us. And when we accept and live in God's love, we find the strength and patience to reach out to the hurting world with healing

and hope. When we live in God's love, we start to see miraculous things happen all around us - rough places, smooth; brokenness, healed; those far away, brought near; despair turned into hope; frozen hearts melted.

God is love is a simple, yet profound affirmation about ultimate truth. Know it, accept it, live it and you will be transformed, the church will be transformed and the world will be transformed through the power of love. Everyday there is opportunity to live God's love. So let's seize the day!

One: The kingdom of love is coming because:

**All: somewhere someone is kind when others are unkind,
somewhere someone shares with another in need,**

One: somewhere someone refuses to hate, while others hate,
somewhere someone is patient - and waits in love,

**All: somewhere someone returns good for evil,
somewhere someone serves another, in love,**

One: somewhere someone is calm in a storm,

All: somewhere someone is loving everybody.

One: Is that someone you?