

Our Own Dear Selves

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

October 29, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship

2nd Sunday of Stewardship Season

Text: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Wow. It's been another tough week. A really tough week, news wise that is. It would have been bad enough, what with the ever escalating conflict in Gaza and the endless tragedies unfolding there. And do we even need to mention the ongoing nonsense masquerading as government in our nation's capital these days? Probably not. Yep, all that was bad enough but, if we're honest even that was slipping into the white noise background of our lives because how much trauma and bad news can we handle? And then, Maine happened. Out of nowhere an unthinkable mass shooting in not that far away Lewiston, ME happened and it felt like one gut-punch too many. Maine? Really? The epitome of fall New England scenery? How was such a thing even possible to have happened in "Vacationland" as their license plates and border signs proclaim?

And, like too many times before, the more we learned about what had happened, the more awful it was. A lone gunman apparently using an AK 47 assault rifle shot up a bowling alley where a children's bowling league was practicing followed a few minutes later by the same person shooting up a bar where a cornhole tournament for the local deaf community was underway. Each incident lasted less than 5 minutes yet 18 people were dead, damage to the bodies so severe it took two days before everyone could be identified. Even more wounded. The gunman at large. Unimaginable grief, pain, fear gripped us all in that moment. Not again, we thought. Not here. And yet, yes – here. How is this possible? Why did this happen? How much more can we all take? Dear friends, that is sounding more and more like a real question, not a rhetorical one. In recent weeks, we

have been bombarded with one psychic trauma after another and that's just been from the news. It doesn't even scratch the surface of what challenges we have had to endure in our own lives. We all have things we worry about all the time – family, finances, commitments to keep and futures to plan for. How are we supposed to cope with this constant stream of bad news – terrifying news, in fact? What are we supposed to do? Unfortunately, humans being what they are, this situation is not a new one. Humans have been awful to each other since our earliest days but dealing with the results of our own behavior are still mystifying and heart-breaking too much of the time.

The Apostle Paul is dealing with a similar set of emotions in our reading from 1 Thessalonians this morning. He is writing to the people of what he describes in 1:1 as “the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and Jesus Christ.” The two letters to the Thessalonians are the oldest of the writings in the Christian Scriptures, composed around 41CE, meaning Christ's crucifixion had happened barely a decade earlier. These letters from Paul are thus real “on the ground” reporting, as it were, as the followers of Jesus still struggled to figure out what they were supposed to do. Churches – loosely structured groups meeting in people's homes -- were still trying to embrace what it meant to be “church.” Paul, as the premier Christian missionary of this time, was already working to strengthen the network of churches he had planted across the Roman Empire around the Mediterranean in the immediate aftermath of Jesus' death. In this particular letter, he is encouraging the church people to remember the importance of something as basic as how they treat one another. He recounts instances of how he and his companions, Silvanus and Timothy, had been mistreated at some places, such as at Philippi but they didn't let this discourage them, or keep them from doing what they knew God needed them to do. He reminds them that

he and his companions never came to them with anything but God's truth to share, lovingly and with deep care for the needs of the people themselves. He says, "so deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us." In other words, we came to you to tell you about God – yes – but just as important, we came to make God's love for you real through how we treated you – with kindness, gentleness, and respect. This is why, Paul says, they had "been approved by God to be entrusted with this message."

Our own dear selves. This is how Paul responded when confronted with meanness, with unkindness, with accusations that he was not who he claimed to be. He, along with Sylvanus and Timothy, came and shared deeply who they had become as a result of being transformed by God's abiding love for them. Paul, then, didn't just talk to these people about God's love. He embodied it in how he lived his life each day. This is what I think Paul meant when he talks about sharing his own self with these people who had become dear to him. Paul knew and was trying reveal to the people of the church in Thessalonica through personal example, what God's love really means. It is more than words that can be mouthed by anyone. God's love is only real when it's shared without condition and reservation with God's people because everyone is beloved of God equally. Certain people are not more beloved of God than others. Dear ones, this was a radical concept then and it is no less radical today. And, still today, the only way to make this radical concept real to people who have no idea what it means is through action. You have to show people what it means to be loved, by loving them.

Yes, I know. This sounds like so much pie in the sky nonsense. We know some people are patently unlovable. Like the gunman in Maine. Like the terrorists of Hamas. Like the stubborn politicians

who can't move beyond narrow ideology to actually do something. How can we possibly love people like this? That is a real question, a genuine one and an important one. It reminds me of all the hippy dippy posters prevalent everywhere in the 1970's. I know because a lot of them adorned my dorm room walls in college: "Make Love Not War" – "Love Is the Answer" -- "All You Need Is Love" etc., etc., etc. Nice sentiment but they are just words after all. Aren't they? Not so fast, Paul tells us. Words that explain, that teach God's love are important BUT they only become *real* in our actions. Kindness, gentleness, patience, understanding – these are all ways love is expressed tangibly between one person and another. But, the question still remains, how exactly do we do this? Is it even possible?

Thich Nhat Hahn whom we know through our weekly mindfulness practice in our "Moment to Breathe" during worship believes it is possible to respond to anyone – ANYONE – with love. His descriptions of how to do this, though, do not focus on the nebulous concept of "love" in that ubiquitous '70's sense. He brings that concept down out of the rafters as he encourages what he calls mindfulness practice which "contains the energy of concentration, understanding and compassion."¹ Anyone can do this, he insists, at any time. All it takes is a willingness to be mindful – pay attention – to your feelings and how they cause you to respond to other people and, in turn, cause other people to respond to you. Central to Hahn's thinking is that you do this not because it's a nice thing to do, although it is. You do this not because it makes you feel better, although it will. You do this because you by the mere fact of being human are intended always to do what you can to respond to the sufferings of others. The mindfulness practice of pausing to breathe intentionally creates an energy within you that enables you to respond

¹ Thich Nhat Hahn, *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*, ©2001, Riverhead Books, p. 88.

differently than you otherwise would. Hahn observes that this mindfulness energy is what Christians think of as the power of the Holy Spirit which Jesus has and embodies, and which enabled him to do so much healing among the people he encountered.² This is exactly what Paul is also describing in this section of the letter to the Thessalonians this morning. Paul is reminding us that we can make a difference in the lives of all kinds of people just by treating them with the compassion they deserve by virtue of being human. It really is that simple. Just like Jesus taught. Just like Paul kept teaching. Just like Thich Nhat Hahn continued to teach throughout his lifetime. Hahn died only a few years ago meaning that this concept of mindful compassion is something we humans struggle with mightily and probably always will. Yet its worth and importance is beyond doubt.

But what does this mean practically? It's easy to figure out that being kind, compassionate and understanding to the people we encounter routinely every day can have an impact. It can be and is super difficult to do as a matter of course, but we can see how we might be able to at least try to do that. But what about these other people – these awful people, these people for whom murder and terror has become a way of life. Surely God doesn't expect us to love them. Well, honestly, that's a tough one to answer in the sense that God does know our shortcomings – what we can and cannot do – and God offers us unconditional love and forgiveness for all the ways we continually fall short of God's hopes for us. The truth is we know all too well what we should do but we so often fail to do it. We also know what is wrong and we do it anyway. So, on the one hand, I am confident God totally gets that even trying to love some people is a bridge too far for us. And God forgives us for that inability. But – here's the key point – God would still expect us to try. God does

² Ibid.

expect us to try to love the unlovable, even if we can only get as far as naming them as unlovable. Thich Nhat Hahn talks about this in similar terms when he writes, “ don’t wait for the other person to practice in order to start practicing (mindfulness containing the energy of compassion). You can do it for both of you.” Don’t wait for the other person to be mindful, to be loving, to be compassionate. You start and do it for the both of you.

Do it for the both of you. Wow. Love the unlovable person knowing that you are doing it for both of you. And what would that look like in the case of the Maine gunman? Understanding that this was someone deeply mentally ill who should never have had access to the weapons of mass murder that he did. What a kindness it would have been to him, to all those people he murdered and their families, to all those first responders traumatized forever by what they saw – if he had never had access to that weapon in the first place. Understanding, compassion, forgiveness, love – all possible, all necessary in the process of healing now confronting so many. Will most get there? Maybe not, and that is how and why trauma cycles on for generations.

These cycles of trauma, injustice and the resulting anger and pain are what undergird the horrors now unfolding in Gaza. The Palestinians have been in search of a homeland for decades, a search that has led some to embrace extremist Islamic jihad or holy war as the only viable solution when the enemy is itself wrapping itself in religiosity. Yet we know that was no excuse for the murder and kidnapping of innocent Israeli citizens. The hatred and distrust on all sides of this conflict are deep and long-standing. Is forgiveness, is love, even possible here? Well, of course you know I am going to say yes, and I do believe that. But I also know one thing for sure – it always easier to give in to hate than it is to do the hard work of

forgiveness. Is forgiveness even possible here when both sides in this conflict essentially do not even recognize the other's right to exist? I don't know. I don't think anybody does, which is the heart of the problem when you think about it. So, should we be trying to love Hamas here? Or Israel? That is just not realistic. But, what we can do is put in the effort to understand more deeply how both sides reached this point. No one is blameless here. And it is never, ever, EVER acceptable to kill innocent civilians. Yet both sides have done and are doing just that. Leaving us where? Praying for the people living in darkness and fear in Gaza, and for the Israeli citizens wondering if their beloved country will soon be engulfed in all out war. Praying that calmer heads from somewhere prevail and that some sort of peace becomes possible. Praying that somewhere, somehow, God is still in the middle of all this.

Our own dear selves. That is us, dear ones. Every day. Just trying to live our lives in the midst of a world that too often feels like it's unraveling. We're scared. We're wary. We want to do something to make a difference, but we have no idea what that might be. Dear ones, know that you are making a difference just by being you, just by struggling with these questions. Above all, know that your prayers do matter not just because prayer will change whatever it is you are praying about in the moment. Prayer matters most because it is our own dear selves who are changed by our practice of prayer. Every time we pause to pray, we are reclaiming our trust in God, our sure and certain knowledge that somehow, someday, all things are possible with God. In the end, during these scary moments when it looks more and more like the world is tearing itself apart, that's all we have. God and this community of God's people who gather together each week to remind ourselves that hope is still viable, that God's love is real, that Jesus walks with us each day, that the Holy Spirit empowers and

enables us. We come here each week to remember our own dear selves and that we are God's people in this moment. That is enough. Amen.