

Love, in three acts

Pastor Cynthia Lapp

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For 4 voices

Voice 1 — preacher, plain text

Voice 2 — spirit, bold text

Voice 3 — scripture

Voice 4 — contemporary voices, italics

Acts 1:1-14

Acts 1:15-26

John 15: 9-17

Next week is Pentecost, a major feast day of the church, and it's still our day. It has not been taken over by the greeting card industry. With no cards or gifts to buy, how in the world do we prepare for such an event?

“Love, in three acts.” Preparing ourselves for the coming of the Spirit.

“Act 1 — Ascension” (Acts 1: 1-14)

After all they have been through — following Jesus while he healed and taught, his unjust trial, torture and death, then his resurrection, not to mention living under the Roman empire — the disciples are just looking for something concrete. They want an exact time or at least a sign, when Israel will again be a sovereign nation. **“How long, O Lord, how long?”**

But Jesus tells them, as he does so often in the gospels, there are some things that **“God only knows.”**

Their job is to spread the Word, **increase the peace**, to share healing and liberation throughout Judea and Samaria and even parts beyond. And while Jesus won't be with them, a Spirit of power **will be coming**. With that spirit empowering them they have no need to be limited to just Jerusalem, **“they can spread the Word world wide,”** or at least to gentiles as well as Jews.

And then Jesus is gone on the clouds and there are the disciples, **“with their chins in the air, standing like turkeys in the rain.”** It takes the mysterious messengers in white to get them to lower their eyes to the world around them. They make their way to an upstairs room in Jerusalem, **where they get to work, praying.**

In Luke it reads differently, **“weren’t Luke and Acts written by the same guy?”** In Luke, instead of cloistering themselves in a room to pray, **they go to the temple** in Jerusalem and speak God’s praises over and over.

Jesus may have left them, but they have not abandoned each other. The remaining eleven disciples are gathered, **“and the faithful women,”** and even some of Jesus’ flesh and blood family.

Ascension — What is loving about leaving those who love you? **It’s the leaving that allows the Spirit to come.** But they weren’t ready to be on their own. The disciples had only trained for three years. They were barely prepared.

This kind of love shows trust in those who are left behind. Jesus demonstrates that he believes the disciples can carry on; they are ready and prepared to plow ahead with whatever comes their way. Most of the time in Christianity we speak of having faith in Jesus, **but here Jesus shows faith in the disciples.** He believes in them and what they are capable of. He suggests that they don’t have to stop at spreading the Word in Jerusalem or even to the Jews. **They can share the healing, hospitality and compassion he taught with the whole world.** That is faith.

Love may be the greatest gift of all, but it is pretty amazing when someone has faith in you. When someone has faith in you, you don’t want to let them down. You want to prove that they are right. **How would we live our lives if we understood that Jesus/God/Spirit have faith in us?** Jesus — has faith — in me?

Act II — the Choice (Acts 1:15-26)

Now life gets real. **“Cut the prayer and praise.”** It is time to get back to business. **Jesus chose 12 Jewish guys to work with him** and they are down to 11. They no longer represent the 12 tribes of Israel. **Now that Jesus is gone for good**, they better get to work replacing Judas. It has been more than 40 days.

They have quite a few people to pick from. With 120 gathered there it shouldn't be too hard to find an appropriate replacement. The gathered faithful even include some of the women that had followed Jesus. **“What if they choose a woman?”**

It is kind of ironic that the disciples choose a replacement using the lot. According to several of the gospels, the lot was used to gamble for Jesus' clothing at the foot of the cross. On the other hand, this was a common decision-making tool, *eenie, meenie, minie moe* **except with prayer**. Online commentator Dan Clendenin says, *“...I have always wondered if any church committee has ever dared to use this method. The apostles resorted to ‘dumb luck’ to ascertain the divine intent. A roll of the dice identified Matthias instead of the alternate Joseph...”*¹

Of course as soon as I read that I had to email him and tell him that not only do Mennonites use “dumb luck” to choose committee chairs, we use it to **“pick pastors and bishops,”** or we used to. According to my father, it worked like this with Mennonites in the east:

The first Sunday, a sermon was preached about the qualifications needed in a new minister and nominations were taken. The next few days all the men who had been nominated were visited **to see if they were willing to have their names in the lot**. The second Sunday there was a service **to choose the new minister**. Those in the lot came to the front and chose a hymnal (or bible) from the stack. One book had a slip of paper in it that said something like **the lot falls to the chosen one**. Each man chose a book and after all had chosen their books they opened them to find out **who God had chosen as the next minister**. The chosen one was ordained immediately.

¹ <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20060522JJ.shtml>

My father says this was very emotional, “**grown men weeping,**” the wives crying, “**children running from the church house in horror.**” It meant an immediate change of life, from being a full-time farmer to being a full-time farmer “**and minister to the congregation.**”

Since the lot is used in Acts 1 before the Holy Spirit comes in Acts 2 **is the Spirit involved at all?** Is it as Clendenin says “a roll of the dice”?

My grandfather, John E. Lapp, was chosen by lot to become pastor at the age of 27 and five years later he was chosen bishop. He always said he knew that the lot would fall on him. **Maybe the Spirit works in many ways.**

These days we expect spiritual people **to choose seminary**, to choose church leadership, **to choose God.** With the lot, there was the assumption that God was doing the choosing, **the Spirit was at work**, you just had to trust the process, **which excluded quilters, bakers and homemakers.** Was this another instance where **God had faith in followers**, farmers or carpenters or business men even if they had no formal theological training?

Act III — Love — Read John 15: 9-17

In the time between Easter and Pentecost, “**50 days,**” the compilers of the lectionary include a lot of passages from John and I John about love, “**how to love each other,**” what love through Jesus and God look like. The lectionary is helping us prepare for the coming of the Spirit, **so we are receptive to the Spirit.** But what does love really look like?

(1 John 5:5) **Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.**

(I John 4) **God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.** 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. ¹⁹**We love because God first loved us.**

(I John 3): ¹¹For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, **that we should love one another.**

¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods **and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?** ¹⁸Little children, let us love, **not in word or speech**, but in truth and action.

Memorial Day weekend. "**Rolling Thunder.**" The celebration of people who have made the ultimate sacrifice for this country, "laid down their lives for their friends," **Isn't that love?** Even if it was by serving in the military?

What about people that aren't in the military? What about people who lay down their lives for people they barely know? Like Rachel Corrie being run over by a bulldozer as she defended the homes of Palestinians. Or Gene Stoltzfus who traveled to Pakistan this week with Christians for Creative Non-Violence. *"As representatives of the United States peace movement our group of five people are seriously concerned about the drift to war in the region and its effect on Pakistan with no apparent exit strategy to end it... We were encouraged to undertake this venture by our Pakistani friends. As we listen to the Pakistani people we will assemble what we learn, and work to expand the growing movement to build peace in this region and among people in the United States..."*²

Then there are the 12 rabbis, ministers and others who go to court this Tuesday for **blocking entrance** to a notorious gun shop in Philadelphia that refuses to adopt a voluntary code of conduct relating to how and to whom it sells guns. **Protests outside the gun shop have been going on for months** and now 12 of those arrested will go on trial.

Love propels people to make radical choices.

We have the option of choosing to leave the comfort of our homes, **taking a stand for love somewhere in the world.** But most of us seek ways to show love closer to home, **or in our homes.** We are more like the youngest daughter, Glory, in the Marilyn Robinson novel, "Home." Glory comes home to take care of her aging and ailing father though she resents being there in many ways. **But she loves her father**, so she stays to care for him, **responding to his every**

² <http://peaceprobe.wordpress.com>

cough and snuffle. Her love for him guides her. Though using love as a guide **doesn't mean that our choices are easy.**

Using love (and justice) as our guide, we are in the beginning stages of putting an elevator in our church building so that the worship and fellowship space are accessible to all. I had a conversation a few months ago with a man who was quite angry about his own congregation's choice to install an elevator. *"We could have built a dormitory and sent 100 children to school for a year in Ghana with the amount of money we spent on that elevator."* What is the loving response?

Using love (and justice) as our guide we have a membership practice of welcoming lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians into membership. But of course some people in our conference see it differently. They think our choice is anything but loving. They understand **themselves as acting in love** by taking away our right to vote.

Love is a lot more complicated than it looks on the surface. Love in Three Acts. **If God has faith in us** — Act 1 — **if God chooses us** — Act 2 — then how can we respond with anything but love? **Act 3.**

Prepare for the Holy Spirit of power: **she is coming.** Little children, let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action.