

A sermon preached May 24th, 2020 based upon John 17:1-11, entitled, "What Inspires a Parade in the Midst of an Epidemic."

Last Tuesday there was a birthday parade for Doris. Two fire trucks and maybe sixty people from the church in cars with decorations, balloons and signs, with much honking and shouting "We love you, Doris!" It was a tribute to a life well lived and to the principle that if you give out love and love will come back.

I want to come back to Doris later in my sermon.

I've been reading a fascinating book entitled, "Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind". If you're like me, you tend to think of human history as being maybe 10,000 years old but in fact creatures who share the same DNA as you and me have been on the earth for 200,000 years. Up until 16,000 years ago every human being lived in small, close knit communities of hunters and gatherings wandering across the land. They absolutely knew they needed each other to survive. By nature we are — the social scientists tell us — social beings.

Most of us would probably say that we sure are glad that we live now and not back then, but here is something to contemplate: loneliness essentially didn't exist for at least 184,000 years.

16,000 years ago the agricultural revolution took place which led to people settling down in towns which grew increasingly larger over town. About 250 years ago the pace of change sped up with the Industrial Revolution.

People became increasingly mobile following work opportunities.

Up until about seventy years ago when you talked about families you were referring to extended families – large networks of aunts and uncles living close together helping to raise children, and plenty of cousins to grow up with, and the elderly cared for by their families. But rapidly the "nuclear" family evolved as society's norm: two parents with 2 ½ children. As time passed, incredible stress was put on this small family unit to meet all the emotional and physical needs that extended families once met. Under such pressure, the nuclear family began to break down. Increasingly homes were inhabited by single-parent families, with millions of people living all alone. In recent years Loneliness has become an epidemic unto itself contributing to the rise of addiction, depression, and violence turned both inward and outward. A former Surgeon General recently wrote a book in which he makes the case that loneliness is as destructive if not more so to a person's health as smoking or obesity. Chronic loneliness wears down the immune system.

Our increasing isolation as a society has been driven home to us in new ways with the present quarantine because of Covid 19.

Thus far I've describing the insights of social scientists who emphasize regarding our need for human connection. Now I want to talk from the perspective of the Christian faith.

The Bible has always known the truth that we are social beings: *"It is not good for the man to be alone,"* said God at the outset. We are made in the image and likeness of God, and this God is one who is all about relationships. The concept of the Trinity expresses the truth that relationship is at the heart of the "Godhead." And God brought creation into being out of a desire to be in relationship with this creation of love.

Social scientists are wary of using the word "love", but our faith affirms that we were created out of love, and our truest self – that which is made in the image and likeness of God – is expressed in loving relationships.

It is helpful to study humans as biological beings or economic beings, but at the deepest level we are spiritual beings with a soul.

Two other words that scientists tend to avoid are "good" and "evil." Our faith asserts that goodness and evil are very real and that our lives are at their core a spiritual journey in which we traverse the pull of these two competing realities – a struggle that takes place in the hearts of each of us. Day by day, minute by minute we make choices that take us in the direction of good or evil and shape our destiny. The journey is not straight: oftentimes it is through the inevitable so-called wrong choices that we all make that there comes an opportunity to learn more deeply what love and compassion are all about, and teach us the humility to reach out for God's transforming grace.

But sometimes the lessons are not learned. The journey can take us in the direction of an increasing self-centeredness and hard-heartedness.

When at the end of our reading this morning Jesus prays for our protection he isn't asking God to keep us safe from physical dangers that are an inevitable part of living in this world. He is praying for protection from our hearts succumbing to evil. Jesus prays for our protection and he prays that *"we may be one"* – connected in loving relationships that nurture us on our spiritual journey.

Which brings us back to Doris. When Doris and her husband Tom and their young daughter Barb arrived in Parsippany nearly sixty years ago, forces beyond their control left them without hardly any "extended family." The decision they made

early on to bind themselves to the circle of love that is our congregation gave them a spiritual family. When forty years ago Doris' husband Tom suddenly died of a heart attack, it a brother and sister of the church family – Jack and Lois – Kelshaw who drove to break the news to Doris and Barb and hold them as they wept.

So each Sunday throughout their lives Doris and Barb have made the choice to join in worship with their spiritual family where together they received weekly reminders that at their deepest core they are spiritual beings put on this earth to express God's love — to forgive when necessary and show up for one another in our times of need. Churches are schools for learning how to love like Jesus. We covenant together to grow in love: towards God, one another and the larger world.

It is because year after year Doris has made it a habit to choose to move towards the light that she is so radiant in her old age. It is the reason sixty people plus a couple of fire trucks were inspired to drive by her house in a pandemic to shower her with love.

One of the things that this pandemic has revealed to us if we are paying attention is just how important it is for us to be the church. Together we witness to the truth that at our core we really are one — as Jesus prayed — and that we might live out that truth in this world where the powers that seek to pull us apart have the capacity to destroy the world.

So thank you for your commitment to be together the Body of Christ. It is so very important.