

The Rev Barbara Ballenger

Who doesn't love something new? The Amazon packaging found throughout my house attests to that. New things arrive every day in a blink of an eye, at the tap of a key stroke. Out with the old to be sold at the parish rummage sale, in with the new – and all the packaging it arrives in.

But sometimes the new comes on its own, without being ordered or invited. Sometimes the new arrives after a time of long suffering and wondering if things will ever change or improve. Sometimes the new is not at all what we have in mind.

This is what is happening in our Scriptures today. God is making all things new in each one of these readings: – unsettlingly new, frighteningly new, a new twist on a long standing command. But be warned, when God does a new thing, something is going to pass away. Something is going to die. It's often something we have a hard time letting go of – like our privilege, or our lives, or our other gods.

Even though we are in the throes of Easter season, our Gospel from John takes us back to a tender conversation that Jesus had with his followers at the last supper, just before his death. I think our lectionary does this because sometimes you have to look back and reflect deeply to see the new thing taking shape.

On the night before Jesus died, as they were gathered at table, Judas had just left the building, after Jesus gave him a morsel of food and told him to do quickly what he had to do. And with the betrayer no longer among them, Jesus turns to his remaining followers and says, "Little children, I'm not going to be with you much longer... where I'm going you cannot come." The whole evening had been marked by the new and the strange. Jesus had washed their feet much to their embarrassment. He mentioned that he would be betrayed, and he spoke of glorifying God with what was about to happen next. And then he would spend a few chapters of John's Gospel explaining how they were to live without him. All of this was a bit of a first for the bewildered disciples. But the new thing that Jesus actually addresses directly is really something very old. "I'm giving you a new command: Love One Another."

That was already something that the Torah called them to do. What was new was how they were to do it, they were to love the way that Jesus loved them. And how had Jesus loved them? He had called them, fed them, explained his teachings to them, admonished them, calmed their storms and washed their feet. He listened to their petty arguments, and he forgave them – over and over again.

Jesus loved them by walking with them every step of the exhausting way, and in that proximity he revealed the very presence of God among them. Because Jesus' love always expressed the relational love of his Abba – they were one and the same. Lover and beloved, giver and receiver – that's how he loved them. And that's how he wanted them to love in his absence. It's also important to remember that Jesus' love for his followers took a somewhat different form than the love he had for the crowds.

Jesus' love for the crowds which he displayed in his acts of feeding, teaching, healing were intended to show them how to find God. Jesus love for his disciples, in his explanations, example, and instruction, showed his disciples how to be servants as he had served, how to love as he had loved – and whom that love was for.

That was the love they received from Jesus as they accompanied Jesus in his ministry while he was alive among them.

In that upper room, gathered around a meal as the Passover neared, his followers did not yet understand the scope of the love that was coming -- that Jesus' ultimate act of love for them and for all would take the form of a cross, would involve his own dying to bring on the new thing that was just on the other side of Calvary. That would be his last word on love and forgiveness and the life that flowed from it.

Over time, as their fear of the cross settled, as the Holy Spirit filled the place Jesus left empty, Jesus' followers would know that to love one another as Jesus loved them was to not only to accompany, serve, feed, teach, and forgive others -- but also to die. That might mean very literal death, as so many of his immediate followers would experience it at the hands of Rome, as a consequence of their love for Jesus.

But it also meant the kind of death the circumcised Christians of the Acts of the Apostles encountered, when they learned that God had extended salvation to people they assumed would be left behind. Those earliest Christians had to die to their own certainties, judgements and criticisms. In fact every time the people of the early church turned around it seemed like something new was happening in the name of Jesus. And often it had to do with who had been added to the phrase "one another."

Members of Israel who had been formed to stay separate from Gentiles, to not visit them or dine with them or eat their food in order to obey their covenant with God, would find themselves breaking old laws and living into a new commandment – love one another. Greek converts in Corinth who thought they had figured out how to cater the heavenly banquet on earth, discovered that it meant eating with their slaves and servants and sharing their wealth with them.

The first deacons would be called to facilitate the diverse table fellowship that developed and ensure that it was inclusive and equitable and accessible – in order so people could love one another. Jesus' followers would be called to love one another across their disagreements on who Jesus had been and who he was now among them. They would have to work out what following Jesus meant if he was no longer among them, and the best way to do that was to love one another. And they would have to get used to the idea that "One another" might eventually include everyone.

For as old an idea as Love is, it always seems to make things new.

This is what we get in the exquisite image from Revelation, as heaven touches earth and both are no longer what they were before. The thing that connects heaven to earth in this new cosmology is the

idea that God has made the divine dwelling in the depths of the creation. And as those first things – all those things that cause pain and anguish – come into contact with the love of God they are changed.

*"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."*

In this book of apocalyptic promises, written in the throws of Roman oppression and death, the early church proclaimed its hope in coded language. This poetry is not a bad description of the way that Jesus loved the people he was sent to serve and save. It is a beautiful description of how God loves them and us. It is an apt poetry for the effects that the love of those who serve God has upon the world.

"See I am making all things new," says the one seated on the throne. But there is no sense of when that making began or when it will end, just that it is happening.

And this is our hope, we who are called to love one another as Jesus loved us. We are participants in God's work in making all things new. It is happening right now through those who manage to love with the love of Jesus. And I'm here to tell you that that love does not always or only come at the hands of those who call themselves Christians. Interestingly I think we are again in a time when those who believe they have a corner on the story of how Christ works are dismayed at who Jesus is filling with the divine spirit and sending off to proclaim the good news.

I'm thinking of those who are right now losing their old lives – their freedoms, their jobs, their academic opportunities, their incomes and stability – because they served or spoken out for vulnerable people. I'm thinking of students and teachers like Mahmoud Khalil, arrested and detained for speaking out against the destruction of Palestine. I'm thinking of historians, scientists, environmentalists, social service workers, educators, and so many others who have lost their jobs because of their commitment to protecting vulnerable people or to practicing diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility. I am thinking of those who are threatened for helping women get the health care they need or who are protecting undocumented workers from deportation without due process.

I am thinking that there are real ramifications to defying hate right now. And that's new for many of us. A new call, a new consequence, a new Christianity.

How we are called to respond is still unfolding. But we have our marching orders – to love as Jesus loved.