February 2020

**Reckless Love: Bishop Bruce R. Ough’s Ash Wednesday message**

It is a personal privilege to greet you as we enter our 40-day Lenten journey, which will culminate in the Easter festival celebrating Jesus’ resurrection and victory over sin and death.

During these 40 days, commencing with Ash Wednesday, we journey with Jesus as he claims and fulfills his mission—a mission he announced was already being fulfilled as he read from the prophet Isaiah to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. You will recognize these words:

> “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
> because the Lord has anointed me.  
> He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,  
> to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind,  
> to liberate the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Luke 4:18-19

These 40 days of Lent are also a season in which each of us is invited to more fully embrace this same mission for our lives. We do this by first adopting and persistently attending to the same disciplines Jesus did—self-denial, humility, fervent prayer, obedience to God’s word and spirit, witness for peace and justice. You know the ultimate discipline Jesus practiced, modeled, and taught was love of God and neighbor. In fact, Jesus made this a commandment to his followers. You may recall how Jesus responded to the legal expert who asked him which commandment is the most important of all. Jesus responded:

> “Israel, listen! Our Lord is the one Lord and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: you will love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these.”

Mark 12:29-31

Now we don’t often think of loving as a spiritual discipline. Yet, loving God and neighbor is at the core of nearly all of Jesus’ parables and ministry activities. Jesus demonstrated and taught how to love without condition and without consideration for personal cost. He demonstrated and taught how to love with one’s whole heart and with reckless abandon.

This is the very starting point of Tom Berlin’s insightful book titled “Reckless Love: Jesus’ Call to Love Our Neighbor.” Many of you will be utilizing this book with the accompanying videos by the Dakotas and Minnesota Cabinets for your own Lenten studies. I heartily commend both the book and the video reflections.
You know, I love Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son, or what more accurately, I believe, is the parable of the Prodigal Father. It was the father who demonstrated reckless love. The father crossed all acceptable social norms when he yearned for his son’s return, ran to welcome him home, lavished him with unconditional forgiveness, gave him new clothes, threw him an expensive welcome home party, and restored the son’s honor, place, and authority in the household. And, then the father spoke: “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:24).

Now I don’t know about those of you who may be reading this message, but I want to love like the father loved the son. I want to practice the discipline of reckless love because it will unencumber and expand my soul and increase my capacity to love God.

Tom Berlin quotes Barbara Brown Taylor to make this very point. Taylor writes in her book “An Altar in the World”:

““The hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self—to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it.”

Or as Berlin himself says: “...nothing reveals what keeps us from fully loving God and growing in the likeness of Christ like attempting to love our neighbor...loving my neighbor is the fastest way to identify all the rough spots of my soul” (page 21).

To love as Jesus loved transcends emotion and even pious devotion. To love as Jesus loved results in specific actions—like the Prodigal Father’s loving actions. Religious piety is bankrupt without justice. Lenten disciplines are hollow without sacrificial love. Lenten ashes and sackcloth are empty symbols without clothing the poor. Fasting is void of true spiritual content without sharing your bread with the hungry. Retreating to a sacred prayer place is arrogant without providing places for the homeless. Denying oneself some luxury or convenience during Lent is meaningless without sharing one’s abundance with those in need of help and hope.

Dear friends, as we move even deeper into our Lenten journey this year, I invite you to join me in practicing the spiritual discipline of reckless love. I invite you to lavishly, graciously love our neighbors because his is the pathway to learning what it means to fully love God. This is the pathway to a life that is whole, complete, joyful, and saved.

I pray for each of you a rich and blessed Lenten journey.

Bishop Bruce R. Ough
Dakotas-Minnesota Area
The United Methodist Church