

## Sixth Week of Easter May 12, 2024

### Maynard Atik

*"This is my commandment.....love one another."* Ordinarily, when people obey a command, there may be a feeling of fear or resentment. For example, if a police officer - or "*Copper*," as my beloved, Darleen, loves to say: "*Copper, 3 o'clock!*" - if one pulls me to the side of the road, even if it is for my own safety, I usually react with cold sweat & butterflies in the tummy, much to my beloved's delight, because she thinks I'm gonna get my just due & she wants to see the "*Copper*" nail my behind! But it is different with the commands of God, because the commandments are linked to God's love. And for some reason, it's a bit different from the rule-keeping notion.

How?? Welllll...., let's take another cut at this from a completely different angle. Lutheran historian, Martin Marty printed a snippet entitled, "*Good preachers work without a net.*" The strange act of preaching, Marty says, is comparing a preacher climbing into the pulpit & watching a tightrope walker climbing onto the platform as the drum roll begins. The 1st clears her throat & spreads out her notes; the 2nd loosens his shoulders & stretches out one resin-soled foot to test the taut rope. Then both step out into the air, trusting everything they have done to prepare for this moment as they surrender themselves to it, counting now on something *beyond* themselves to help them do what they love and most want to do. If they reach the other side without falling, it is skill, but it is also grace - a benevolent God's decision to let these daredevils tread the high places where ordinary mortals have the good sense not to go. The question is asked: why preach?? Because the preacher is in love with the language of his or her congregation & the words of God. But more than that, the preacher makes the long, lonely climb up the steps to face the tightrope again because she/he is in love. The struggle for the right words to say isn't just a quibble over syntax; it is the sweet agony of announcing to the world that one is *shamelessly* loved & taken by that Other who is being talked about, praised & proclaimed. And this final quote from Marty: "*but i am also in love myself, which means that i am deeply involved in the messages that I bear. I do not speak for myself, but I do. I am one of the crowds down in the bushes, & the longing i put into words is my own. When the Holy Vision speaks, it is my own heart that is pierced.*" Our gospel proclamation says: "*As my Abba has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love....this is my commandment...love one another as I have loved you.*" All of Christ was given for us. Because we are connected, because we abide/we remain in Christ & Christ in us. Because we are baked in the same cake with Christ, we love with all that we have & are, with that *same* mix of *risk* & *confidence*, of the *hesitancy* & *fumbling* of a tightrope walker or preacher. Hang on...there's more.

My faith roots from Trinity Lutheran church in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn were set within the pious, low church Haugianers from southern Norway & the old United Norwegian Lutheran church, one of the sources from which a few, a precious few, of us have sprung. I know those Haugianer Norskies have been characterized as a passle of pious prudes who believed they'd catapulted themselves into the arms of the Almighty under their own steam. And those actions tended to give my faith forebears a kind of i choose-Jesus-as-i-choose-pears-over-pickles cast. But, when given to reflection, it was Luther's Small Catechism's meaning to the 3<sup>rd</sup> article of the Apostles' Creed, "*I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel*".....that lay in the marrow of their bones. In other words, none of us are Christian, & this congregation did not come into existence because we willed it, because we vowed to become religious, pious & good, because we chose to love as Christ commanded. **But** because God in God's infinite love & wisdom chose us, loved us **1st** & appointed us & equipped us. What we are on the vine & what we have been is God's work alone. We can talk 'til the cows come home of giving our heart to Jesus, of our deciding for Christ, of even deciding to affirm our faith, but the greater truth of the matter is that we are here & this Christian Church of which we are part exists because God **first** loved us & not the other way around. And we'll still be god's whether or not we're scattered to the 4 winds & whether or not we feel the breath of the almighty at our back. God's word works on its hearers - you & me - does things to us, destroys sin through forgiveness, puts to death our old unbelieving selves & raises us as new creatures to lives of faith.

I had a seminary classmate who was the most pick-wick collection of flesh & bones i ever saw. He trotted around the seminary looking for all the world as though he was weaned on a sour pickle. He damned his professors, fought with his classmates & hated his studies. He thought the scriptures were nothing but a badly written chunk of Jewish history. During his internship year he was continually embattled by "*Jesus freaks*", everlastingly meowing & caterwauling about their having found Christ, having been "filled" with the Holy Spirit, as Luther loved to put it, as though they swallowed "*her*", feathers & all! Thus, continually challenged to give proof of his Christian identity before this troop of pious, prattling, purring pussycats, one day in as unreflective a moment he ever had, he pounded his fist on the nearest object & shouted, "*I am a Christian! I've been baptized!*" And the whole blessed world, & he with it, fell into place. It dawned on him like, the bright sun, that before he could lisp God's name he was made God's very own in the baptism, & the result was as radical transformation in a human being as one has ever seen. We've been baptized & in our baptism we received the spirit - all of the spirit - no matter what our Pentecostal & White Nationalist Evangelical, or Two Seed in the Spirit friends think. And ever since, ever

since, everything we've done is as members of his body, is as fruit on the vine, abiding in him: pulling teeth, removing gallbladders, taking temperatures, giving shots in the arm, teaching English, advocating for racial justice through study & action, plowing through math, swimming those forever laps, sewing quilts, screwing nuts on bolts, making a million, or making enough to get along, washing dishes, fixing, or learning to fix meals for the family, serving in our food bank, or on the Transition Team, or Call Committee, ***all*** of it we've done ***in*** Christ, ***for*** Christ, ***to*** Christ. But lest we get a bit puffed up, remember this fruit bearing is something Christ *first* gives, not just something we do, trying to prove we've done something for Jesus on our own hook. The same Christ, who loves us & abides in us, has *first* chosen us & appointed us & equipped us so that we'll bear fruit & he'll make it last.....count on it! This body, this Church, this vine, (*because that's what we are*) is nothing but one grand whopping testimony of the truth that none can come to the Christ unless our loving Abba draws them. To have been that, just for a brief moment in this world's history, that's as much as any Church should ever dare to be & that's more than most will ever have the chance to be. Through you & me God wills to reveal God's loving heart, & through you & me God hands on the power of holy love.

Here's a question to ponder: how do you imagine God? Martin Luther's answer to this question is surprising: "*When I think of God,*" Luther said, "*I think of a man hanging on a tree.*" He said this not to keep a gruesome, dreadful image of pain and suffering before our eyes, but rather to remind us that there is no length to which God will not go to embrace us in love. There is nothing that God would not do to save us through love. There is nothing God will allow to come and remain between us and God's love. God's love will conquer. God's love will prevail. God's love will win—as Christ's love is lived and shared and bears fruit in this world—through you and me. *Why?* Simply put, we are Easter people, branches on the vine, chosen in love to love, living some 6 weeks after that bright Sunday morning when once-dead Jesus was brought forth from the tomb, the day when life stepped over the boundary of death & lovingly started planting life. Amen.