

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Sarah Reed at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 10, 2012.

“Arms Wide Open”

Genesis 3:8-15; Mark 3:23-35

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When I sit in our chapel at Nationwide Children’s Hospital, I’m drawn to these words that are printed on the wall: *Estad quietos y conoed que soy dios. Be still and know that I am God.* Let us pray: Dear God, may our hearts be still, that the spirit of love and grace be ever present.

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I have long believed that each person who enters ministry does so because they have a message to share. In my work in the Association’s Department on Church and Authorized Ministry, I ask those who come to us for endorsement or privilege of call, “What is your message? What do you yearn for all the world to know and live?” My message is this: God is love and the nature of love is to open wide one’s arms in relationship. In the love of God there are no margins, no insiders or outsiders; there is a holy, holy, holy reach of love experienced as extravagant inclusion. My purpose is to share with you what this means for me.

I recently gave a prayer for the celebration of cancer survivors and as I wrote that prayer, I thought about how often we wonder at the presence of God and how we struggle for proof that God is with us as love, or as any other form or metaphor of knowing God. The question is especially profound when we are deeply in trouble, physically or emotionally.

The fact that I was writing a prayer for cancer survivors might be proof enough of God as love. When the brains of cells

go awry, multiplying out of control, children (and adults) are treated with poisons of the most toxic kind. These errant cells are killed off, but so are good cells. The child's immune system is wiped out. Many a parent sits in fear, thinking that the combination of cancer and chemo will be more than their child's body can withstand. I know that the arms of God open wide to hold the sick child, his parents and family, as well as the caregivers that come to his bedside. Jesus invited disciples to "come and see." I have seen.

I also know about God with open arms from biblical texts. In Genesis 1:26, humankind was made in the image of God, and Adam and Eve are the first to tell their stories of what it means to be human. In their story, we learn that to be human means to be curious. It means wanting to grow and to reach for all that life offers. Who among us would not want to know about the tree in the middle of the garden! And who among us would not become embarrassed and want to hide in shame when we realized we had done something wrong?! It's another aspect of being human.

My early memories of guilt and shame take me back to being 4 years old. I secretly climbed to the top shelf of the cupboard to quietly take a forbidden cookie (that would "spoil my dinner"). I did not anticipate that the cover of the cookie jar would slip from my hands, as I teetered on the high shelf and clutched my cookie. The cover smashed into a hundred pieces. Boy, was I in trouble! I ran out the door, across the yard and hid in the tall grass. That cookie just didn't taste as good as usual. My mother was both angry and concerned. She scolded me, had me help clean up my mess, and she let me know I was still loved.

With Adam and Eve, God was both angry and concerned. The author wrote: *God called to the man, "Where are you?"* It's a call that says I want to be in relationship. The story tells us that God set limits on Adam and Eve and the serpent. God also offered them the grace of clothing and God continued to

call, “Where are you?” God’s arms opened wide as a way of maintaining connection.

When I say that the love of God is wide open, that means that compassion trumps law. One message of Jesus’ life was this: It is more lawful to meet human need than to let human suffering go on unnecessarily. In the Mark passage, the people had seen and heard about Jesus’ radical form of compassion, healing and teaching. Everyone wanted to see him. His family was concerned about his safety. The critics were looking for places to criticize and detract from his work.

This gospel segment feels like a lot of confrontation and chaos. This kind of chaos triggers insecurity and fear. But the world was created out of chaos! Chaos also marks the beginning of transformation. As we lean into relationships, we may feel uncomfortably stretched, but it is our willingness to be disturbed, to have our beliefs and ideas challenged by what others think that will restore hope to the future. We have to be willing to say we don’t know and be willing to let go of our certainty. We have to let ourselves be confused.

Because of the complexity of our tangled global system and because no two persons are alike, we each experience life differently. One of my favorite movies from a few years ago is *Crash*, where witnesses of an auto crash try to explain what really happened. The chaos of the various views is a good match for the chaos of the crash. The variety of interpretations is much richer than any one by itself.

I work with seminary students as they gain practical experience of ministry in a hospital setting. It’s fast paced and at times quite chaotic. They learn about taking risk, transparency, and becoming vulnerable. They often come, like I did, stuck in their histories. Through sharing their here-and-now experiences and feelings, especially in their group work, they learn to take and use all of themselves in their care for others. They learn that, like the families they meet, they may be fearful, angry, sad, and anxious. They learn that we

connect with God through our humanity. They learn that approaching life with arms wide open means offering our vulnerable selves. What follows is intimacy and relationship.

Students learn to listen with curiosity, rather than certainty. The greatest benefit of curious listening is how often it brings parties closer together. One of President Obama's earliest foreign interventions was an appeal to Arabs and Muslims to find ways to connect. In a speech made in Cairo in 2009, he closed by saying, "All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort – a sustained effort – to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to respect the dignity of all human beings." (Cairo University, June 4, 2009)

It's not our differences that divide us; it's our judgments. I believe that finding common ground requires more curious listening and less judgment. When we listen with less judgment, we develop stronger connections. Curiosity and good listening bring us back together. As the world grows larger and more complex, I don't think most of us want to struggle through it alone. I've come to appreciate that I need a better understanding of what's going on and that you can help me do that. I want another person, a presence of God with skin on, with whom to share our fears and hopes. You will help me see new perspectives, and I'll know that you will value me and mine.

I believe growth is possible because of the depth and breadth of God's love. It is a love so great that we can go through life creating the same messes that we always have day after day, and still we are surrounded by the spirit of love. Because of this love, we are given second chances again and again and again. We don't have to do anything. We just have to be! Because we are created in the image of God, we are loved. Because of this love, we can be forgiven every day. We can be made whole every day.

Clean the slate, God, so we can start the day fresh! My daily prayer is, “Like a morning shower, send your grace washing over me to rid me of my stupidity, my callous ways, from thinking I can take over your work.” Then I start the day sun-washed clean of my arrogance, clean of my shame. I can start this day without the restrictions that keep me from extending my arms wide in relationship.

It is God’s forgiving love that leads to radical change. Where there had been anger, there is now peace. Where there had been frustration, there is now clear thinking. Where there had been fatigue, there is energy. Where there had been darkness, there is light. Where there had been hate, there is now love. Where there had been a need to protect, there are arms boldly extended in acceptance.

Margaret Wheatley, a leader in the field of organizational learning, wrote of her visit to Robben Island, South Africa, the place where Nelson Mandela and others were imprisoned for more than 25 years. She wrote:

We were standing in a long narrow room that had been used as a prison cell for dozens of freedom fighters. They lived in close quarters in this barren room – no cots or furniture, just cement walls and floors with narrow windows near the ceiling. We stood there listening to our guide’s narration. He had been a prisoner in this room. The cold came up through the floor into our feet as we gazed around the lifeless cell. We stared through the bars as he described the constant threats and capricious brutality they had suffered. Then he paused and gazed down the length of the room. Speaking very quietly, he said: ‘Sometimes, to pass the time here, we taught each other ballroom dancing.’” (Turning to One Another, p. 78)

What an amazing image - men who have been imprisoned for so many years, beaten and weary, teaching each other to dance! The arms that hold one another to dance are wide open arms of love. The love of God extended for you, for me.

Not long ago I entered church late and sat in the back, wanting to be alone in my thoughts and prayers. As I looked around, I was overwhelmed by abundance – a church full of people, light shining through magnificent stained glass, the marvelous singing of the choir, a well written liturgy, and great preaching.

With this backdrop, the next part of the service was quite powerful. There was baptism that Sunday. It was right after the children's message, when all the children came forward, some with their parents. There were many children, loved by so many adults. They all squeezed together on the steps – abundant love, abundant possibility, abundant grace and energy.

Tim called for the family and baby to come to the chancel. They made their way up. It was a challenge with so many gathered together - Tim, Janine, mother and father, godparents, deacon, and all those kids still on the steps. Tim said something like, "This is Johnny; he is three months old." The congregation "ooed" and "aahed" with love at how new Johnny was. In this place of extravagant love, we prayed for Johnny, "Lord God bless this child and his family all their days." At the end of the service, we all felt fed by God's abundant, merciful love.

That Sunday was especially significant because I had just left the NICU at Nationwide Children's. I had been with little Mala and her father. Mala was 6 days old. She was born months too early and weighed about one pound. She had a tiny, perfectly shaped head and her perfectly formed hands and feet were long and beautiful. Mala's intestines were too small though. Initially, Mala's mother and father were not there because her mother was very ill from the delivery. Finally, after what seemed a very long time, Dad made it to the hospital. He was a young, quiet man. He looked like he needed sleep. At first, he was afraid to hold his baby girl. He did not want to hurt her, and she was so fragile.

With confidence, the nurses helped Dad hold his daughter. He held her for both himself and her mother. I still picture this large man, tenderly holding his tiny baby. There were many tears and not enough tissues. He asked me to baptize baby Mala; in the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer – one Loving God. We said a prayer of blessing and thanksgiving for Mala. May God hold her tenderly, and may God also hold Mala’s mother and father with gentle assurance.

I do not know which child is loved more. Does it really matter? I am moved by the contrasts: one baby, one man, with one chaplain, two nurses, and a doctor, surrounded by 80 babies in bassinets, and . . . one three month old child surrounded by the noise, the abundance, and bustle at First Church. How do I know God’s love stretches wide with open arms? In both places, God was calling, “Where are you? Come, come to me.”

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