

“The New Has Come”

Since we just focused on the Lectionary New Testament Epistle Reading, hopefully most of us noticed the origin of the title for this message. But, what is “the new”? One prominent Biblical “new” is found in the New Testament Book of Revelation in **chapter 21, verse 1, “a New Heaven and a New Earth.”** That reference was about the Fulfillment of the Kingdom of God when Jesus Christ Returns. However, the Apostle Paul was not writing about the realized Kingdom of God in our Reading from 2 Corinthians. Instead, he was writing about the New Life we have because we belong to and are new creatures in Jesus Christ. **Paul wrote in verse 17, “Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come.”**

How often do we think of ourselves as being a New Being in Christ because we have died to the world’s approach – the old way of life? Jesus demonstrated this New Life as he was the first and ultimate example of the New Being of God’s partially present Kingdom. This New Life is characterized by interacting or relating toward everyone with God’s Agape Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love. Instead of being most concerned with his own personal welfare or the fulfillment of his desires, Jesus truly expressed God’s Agape Love toward everyone, even persons rejected by Jewish Society and Religious Leaders.

Let’s consider an example of how the New Life in Christ might be expressed today. Last Sunday, during our Monthly Fellowship Meal, Bud Keil suggested today’s sermon be about the message shared in the flier for the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering, which we are receiving today. Focusing on this Special Offering is both a good idea and a great example of living the new way of God’s Agape Love, instead of the old way of the selfish life. The rationale for the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering in that document provides a powerful example of how living the New Life in Christ might be expressed by us today. Borrowing from that flier and some other resources provided for this Special Offering, let’s consider how the “offering this year focuses on refugees and displaced persons.” The OGHS materials state, **“There is no better biblical story to accompany this work [of ministry to refugees and displaced persons] than that of Ruth and Naomi.”**

Continuing to make the point, the resource reports, “Brief yet profound, in the opening passage of Ruth we encounter the resilience of two women who have been widowed, as well as ravaged by the natural disaster of famine. These ecological and socio-political events rendered Naomi and Ruth the most vulnerable in their society. Just like refugees today, Ruth and Naomi did not have the privilege of choosing to stay in their homes, but were forced to relocate.”

Explaining further, “The Book of Ruth can be read as both a human story and a God story, the former ‘incarnating’ the latter. As a human story, we read about the spirituality of solidarity, which is richly encapsulated in verses 16 and 17.” **Ruth 1:16-17 reports, “But Ruth answered, ‘Don’t ask me to leave you! Let me go with you. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and that is where I will be buried. May the LORD’s worst punishment come upon me if I let anything but death separate me from you!’”**

The OGHS resources elaborate, “In the divine realm, we read of God’s redemption, which is mirrored or reciprocated in the human act of solidarity.” “Redemption means that God stands in solidarity with us. Many times when we hear the story of Ruth, the human archetype for God is Boaz, the ‘kinsman redeemer’ who ‘redeems’ Ruth, securing a life for her. But the divine act of redemption can also be seen in the sacrificial commitment Ruth makes to Naomi to go where she goes and stay where she stays. The mutuality of their relationship is good news for a globalizing world that so often separates people into groups ‘them’ and ‘us’.”

Explaining further, “Applying the words of the theologian Roberto Goizueta to Ruth, to operate out of a mindset of community and mutual encouragement is to apply ‘a theology of acompañamiento [accompaniment]’. In other words, the God who abides in the Ruth story is revealed in the very act of accompanying the most vulnerable in society — both then and now.”

Dealing with the purpose for the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering and our own interaction with others in need, the resource concludes, “Similarly, God is revealed to us in our accompanying of the refugee.” **“As God walks with those who have been displaced, we may see God as we walk together with them as well.”** “Consequently, we, like the refugee, come face-to-face with our own need and vulnerability; seeing God in the midst of all that is. This is an opportunity for Christians to reignite faith and reframe our humanity in our encounter with the faith and humanity of the other. We are able to recognize the transforming power of solidarity, not just for ‘them’ but for ‘us.’ After all, through the eyes of acompañamiento, there is only a united ‘us’!”

This accompaniment approach of Agape Love is also something important for us to keep in mind as we seek to welcome, encourage, and bring healing to guests, who are also struggling in their lives. The Apostle helped connect the New Life in Christ with the needs of others, when he wrote in **verse 18**, ***“All this is done by God, Who through Christ changed us from enemies into His friends and gave us the task of making others His friends also.”***

Being a local expression of the Body of Christ, the Church, this congregation has demonstrated a serious commitment to being God’s agents of change during our 115 years! Briefly, an example of Round Grove’s faithfulness to this call was the founding of the congregation on Epiphany, January 6, 1901. In those 115 years, we have built two sets of facilities to minister in this community. We have had major renovations of both the Original Sanctuary and this main Sanctuary. After being served by part-time pastors for the vast majority of our history, the congregation recommitted itself and called me as its Full-time Pastor over 32 years ago. Soon after my arrival, we united in becoming a Renewal Congregation of the South Central Conference. At the high point of our active membership and attendance, we were engaged in a number of Evangelism Activities and Programs. **Recently, we recognized the need to have another renewal of the congregation and began by raising the funds to purchase and install our new Digital Church Sign, so we can better invite the community to receive God’s Agape Love and the New Life in Christ.**

Today is not only a good day to demonstrate God’s Love through our support of the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering but to also recommit ourselves to being messengers of God’s Good News and Invitation to others, especially those, whose experience has lacked concrete expressions of God’s Agape Love. Our focus on expressing God’s Invitation and Love through the God Is Still Speaking format both in the life of Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ, and on our new Digital Sign is a good start toward expressing the message we are called to share. **Paul wrote in verse 19**, ***“Our message is that God was making all human beings His friends through Christ. God did not keep an account of their sins, and He has given us the message which tells how He makes them His friends.”***

Now is a good time to recommit ourselves to sharing with everyone the message of God’s Agape Love – of Forgiveness, Healing, and Extravagant Hospitality, even though we don’t deserve our Divine Parent’s Grace! **Each of us needs to be sensitive to opportunities to share personal invitations with our friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, and anyone with whom we interact.** At the conclusion of this Worship Celebration, Members of the Chancel Voices will be distributing one of these Invitation Cards for us to share with someone else with reference to our Good Friday Pilgrimage Event on one side and our Easter Worship Celebration on the other side. By sharing those invitations with someone, you provide an opportunity for them to experience God’s Agape Love and Invitation, so they too might be changed from working against God’s Love to embodying Agape. Liberated by Jesus, others can join in the New Life in Christ! **The God Is Still Speaking Message – of Radical Hospitality and Agape Love is very meaningful for persons experiencing difficulties, especially for those, who feel rejected or oppressed by the self-righteous.**

Yes, let’s celebrate God’s Love for us and for all people by responding with generosity to the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering, by living the New Life in Christ – the Life of Agape Love, and by inviting many other persons to also be changed by God’s Love, which was shown in the Son of God, Jesus the Christ! Amen.