

Holy Thursday - 2022  
By Rev. Kathy Donley - Emmanuel Baptist Church

"Love one another as I have loved you." Loving others as Jesus loved us, means that first we have to receive love from Jesus. We have to accept the love of God on God's terms, which might make us uncomfortable. It might be a challenge for us. But learning to accept God's love for us is probably the key to being able to give and receive love from others regardless of their status or ours.

"Love one another as I have loved you." This is not a general call to serve humankind. This is a specific call to give as Jesus gives, to love as Jesus loves, to imitate Jesus in our loving and living. The new community which forms around Jesus, embodies and enacts his love, and in so doing, the community reveals Jesus' identity to the world. [Gail R. O' Day, "John," in *New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 727-28]

That was what happened during early pandemics. In the **year 165, a devastating epidemic** swept through the Roman Empire. Some medical historians suspect this was the first appearance of small pox. Whatever it was, it was lethal. During the 15-year-duration of the epidemic, a quarter to a third of the population probably died of it. At its height, mortality was so great that the emperor wrote of caravans of carts and wagons hauling out the dead.

Then a century later, came another great plague called the **Plague of Cyprian**. Again people died horribly and anyone who could flee, did so. Without understanding germs, the people knew that the plague was contagious, so when symptoms first appeared, the victims were often thrown into the streets to die. But Christians went into the streets to rescue them, providing elementary nursing, food and water to those too weak to cope for themselves. There are some estimates that such care saved as much as two-thirds of the sick. (Excerpted from Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* [New York: HarperOne, 2011], 114-119.)

Christians became known for caring for the sick while the non-Christians gave in to their fear and abandoned the ill and the dying. Christians were also dying, but they trusted that in life or in death, they were in God's hands. What went on during the epidemics was only an intensification of what went on every day among Christians. Christians became so identified with this love that in the fourth century the emperor Julian challenged the imperial priesthood to compete with the Christian charities. In a letter to the high priest

of Galatia, Julian urged the distribution of grain and wine to the poor, noting that "the impious Galileans [Christians], in addition to their own, support ours, [and] it is shameful that our poor should be wanting our aid."

This kind of selfless love repeated itself many times in history, during the **Black Death** of Martin Luther's Time and the **cholera epidemic in London in the 1850's**. In those difficult times and many others, Jesus' followers took seriously his commandment to love one another as I have loved you."

This historical information comes from the work of social historian Rodney Stark who suggests that the courage and love and resilience of those earliest Christians led to **exponential growth**. Non-Christians who were cared for and nursed to health tended to become Christians themselves. The faith community enacted and embodied Jesus' love and in doing so revealed Jesus' identity to the world. They kept this new commandment which, in John's gospel, was one of the last instructions he gave.

After losing his job in 2010, Brandon Stanton moved to New York and began an ambitious project, to photograph 10,000 New Yorkers on the street. Armed with his camera, he began crisscrossing the city, covering thousands of miles on foot, all in an attempt to capture New Yorkers. Somewhere along the way he began to interview his subjects in addition to photographing them. He asked one of two questions, which seem to open the doors into people's lives: "What is your greatest struggle?" or "Give me one piece of advice."

This project turned into the blog known as "Humans of New York" which has 20 million followers. One of those Humans of New York helped Brandon understand his project is really about the power of stories. Shirley was an older woman photographed with wisps of grey hair sticking out from a furry cap, with a little bit of mascara under her wrinkled eyes, and an umbrella in the background.

Shirley said, "When my husband was dying, I asked: 'Moe, how am I supposed to live without you?' He told me: 'Take the love you have for me and spread it around.'" [\[https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735/431477093593063/?type=1&theater\]](https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735/431477093593063/?type=1&theater)

Isn't that just beautiful? "Take the love you have for me and spread it around." How are the disciples supposed to live when Jesus is no longer with them in body? This is what Jesus commands the disciples to do: **Take the love I've shown you and pour it out in the world. "Just as I have loved you...you also should love one another."** Amen.