

## Foreword

In the opening essay of this Pentecost issue, Tom Currie tells of a visit to the Protestant village, Le Chambon sur Lignon, in the mountains south of Lyon, France. There, beginning in 1940, the French Reformed congregation “began sheltering Jewish children, saving some 3,000 or more from the ovens of the Nazis.” Currie visited the little Reformed church in the village which had been at the center of the rescue efforts, and after noticing its Calvinist simplicity, saw etched in stone over the door: “*Aimez-vous les uns les autres.*” Love one another.

Currie acknowledges that the English word *love* can be banal, yet he says, “Here in this particular context, the words not only seemed unbearably heavy with sacrifice and meaning but also seemed to be the words that only the church could dare to say in the face of such a deep darkness. Love one another.” This leads him to wonder: “How does one learn to say that in our day and time? How does one learn to proclaim that, not as a kum ba yah strategy to make warring parties settle down but as the confident witness that only church can render, a witness to the risen Lord’s victory over death itself? And finally, how does one proclaim this word as the joyful gift that describes the nature and course of Christian discipleship?” Currie’s essay takes us into these deep waters and offers us a way of discipleship, of love and freedom, in the midst of our frightened and warring world.

Toward the end of this Pentecost issue, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm takes the preacher into the Gospel of Mark’s “provocative and unsettling stories” that “permeate the weeks following Pentecost in Year B of the lectionary.” Her essay, “Preaching the Gospel of Mark: The Power of Love Among Us,” finds running through these stories, the story of “the steadfast *love of God* calling us to serve one another.” For the preacher who will follow the lectionary readings this summer, Ottoni-Wilhelm provides a gospel guide for proclaiming—“*Aimez-vous les uns les autres.*”

Between Currie’s essay and Ottoni-Wilhelm’s come sermons and essays intended as resources for faithful preaching, 2021. Chris Currie’s sermon “A New Community from Frayed Edges” looks, in light of the Pentecost story in Acts 2, at the racism that haunts and distorts our life as a nation. Mark Ramsey and Tod Bolsinger each explore the ways in which the traumas of this past year have shaken the church and now offer new opportunities for faithful ministry. Ramsey concludes: “The church of Jesus Christ does not need to return to the comfort foods of coping with decline. A gift of this crisis is the opportunity to focus instead on reintroducing ourselves to our culture as the very place of hope and life that is so needed. It is Hosea’s invitation that we carry with us a promise and a charge: ‘But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.’”

What follows are three essays and a sermon that focus on prayer in the midst of a pandemic. James Kay introduces the subject in his profound and moving “The Paradox of Prayer in a Time of Pandemic.” Kay writes that “God’s all-encompassing knowledge of us points to how it is that we can pray. God’s knowledge of us is prior to and greater than our knowledge of God. What is more, God’s knowledge of ourselves is prior to and greater than our own. Therefore, our not knowing how to pray even though we are commanded to pray is actually a hopeful paradox and not a hopeless conundrum.” Kay quotes Tillich: “It is God Himself who prays through us, when we pray to Him. God Himself in us: that is what Spirit means....Something in

us, which is not we ourselves, intercedes before God for us.” What good news for all of us struggling to pray when “we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Rom 8:26)—perhaps especially in a pandemic.

Will Willimon, in his inimitable manner, helps us look closely at “Praying the Lord’s Prayer in a Pandemic.” His essay alone provides a way for a preacher to help a congregation move Sunday by Sunday through a summer of pandemic prayers. In his “Prayer in a Time of Crisis,” Norman Shanks, former leader of the Iona Community in Scotland, offers as a pastor his personal struggles with prayer and the Iona Community’s practice of prayer. Ben Dorr’s sermon, “What Are You Praying For?” provides an example of how a faithful preacher can help a congregation plunge into the mystery and gift of prayer.

In Protagonist Corner, Walter Brueggemann reflects, in “Do the Numbers,” on a dictum of New Testament scholar Amos Wilder: “The zero hour breeds new algebra.” Drawing on a lifetime of living with biblical texts, Brueggemann brings those texts to bear on our present crisis and the possibility of our “doing the numbers” in a new way. In *One New Book for the Preacher*, Ron White recommends *Ethics in Conversation: A Festschrift in Honor of Donald W. Shriver, Jr., 13th President of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York*. Shriver’s life and ministry are revealed, in the essays honoring him, to be a faith odyssey seeking to follow Jesus’ command: “*Aimez-vous les uns les autres.*”

Erskine Clarke