

Note: This is the first sermon I preached at Sycamore after taking a month off for surgery and recovery. It is a sermon about love and gratitude, to God and to my beloved congregation.

Scripture Reading: 1 John 4:7-12

Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us. God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them.

A quote from 14th century Persian poet Hafiz: “I am a hole in a flute that the Christ's breath moves through.....listen to this music” (read twice)

May God bless the reading, hearing and living out of these words.

Opening Prayer (offered spontaneously)

I am here today as living witness to the power of prayer. I went into surgery on April 2nd, just 24 hours after our delicious Easter Sunday breakfast. That was my last meal of the day – no Easter dinner for me! I entered the hospital as someone my doctors described as having an aggressive form of prostate cancer; one that appeared to have been caught early – but going in, we had no idea what the lab test would show afterwards. My partner Carol, who had driven me and was by my side for weeks before and after my surgery described me as being calm and relaxed.

How, you might wonder, could I be calm and relaxed, given the gravity of what was about to be done to me? After all, I now have a beautiful five-inch scar on my tummy to remind me that this was a really big deal. A number of women who have had caesarians have talked to me about their scars as well.

I am here today to witness to the power of prayer. Not just my own prayers and those of Carol, and my extended family, but YOUR prayers. I knew, I was convicted - that I was surrounded by your prayers and by a merry and merciful band of angels. Some of you have been praying for me and our ministry together since the day I first arrived here – God bless you. After hearing about my diagnosis, a number of you were praying for my body, mind, and spirit, as well as for the surgical team and nurses and for the recovery that would surely come. As I lay in my pre-op bed, with the toasty blankets only hospitals have ready all the time, I also prayed for you; by name; I lifted prayers of gratitude for your love – and that too, calmed my heart.

Even before I entered the operating room, healing had already begun. How was the possible? One of the gifts of prayer is that prayer transcends space and time. Today, scientists are exploring the mystery of quantum physics. One of the properties of quantum physics is that the location of a particle can only be determined on the basis of probability. A single particle can exhibit multiple properties and even perhaps location, at the same time. I am here to tell you that those of us who pray, have known this about our prayers for a very long time.

Because of this, even as my body was being operated upon, your prayers were working to help it and the surgeons reattach things. Why? Because God, and therefore, you and I, are indivisibly and wonderfully whole.

You and I, my friends, are loved deeply by a God of wholeness; a God whose greatest desire is for the healing and wholeness of all Creation -why? Because God exists solely in the context and for the purpose of love. This is Wholly Love – W-H-O-L-L-Y love. God wants you and I to be whole, in whatever physical container we inhabit; in whatever condition our body exists. Even in the midst of physical brokenness, ongoing deterioration of our bodies or minds, or pain, God actively seeks wholeness. Our prayers to God and for each other help God to help us become as whole as possible.

The writer of 1st John says, “Love is from God and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God.” To the extent that you and I love – truly love one another AND ourselves, our love flows directly from God. If we experience love, it is because each of us was born with a tiny spark, a shard from the Jewish mysticism tradition, of God’s love.

It is in community that we notice love from others. It is in community we are able to nurture it and share far more love than we individually are able to imagine or experience. Through God’s grace, we are given the opportunity as a church to act as an echo chamber, and to carry that love out into the world.

I will never forget the cards that you many of you signed, cards filled with love, hopes, and prayers. You gave me the first one on the Easter Sunday – a day on which we celebrate the resurrection and promise of eternal life. As moved as I was to receive that card, it was overshadowed by the second card that arrived in the mail.

The second card also had many prayers but it also came with another kind of power. Somebody smart here had figured out, probably weeks or days in advance, that I would really, really need that card and beautiful floral arrangement a few days after surgery. Those were the days *after* the initial excitement and activities of surgery and hospitalization; when the anesthesia had dissipated, when the powerful painkillers had worn off, when I was not only experiencing pain and a variety of discomforts, but realized that, “oh”, this is not fun. I am going to be stuck in this situation for a while; and I allowed myself to feel some sadness and perhaps even a bit of despair.

That’s when your second card arrived – when I needed it the most. In my despondent state, I realized the depth of your love and care. I experienced it as Holy Love – H-O-L-Y love, divine love that comes from God. In 1st Corinthians, Paul writes, if one part of the Body of Christ suffers, every part suffers with it.

But you weren’t going to let me suffer alone, were you? No, because Paul goes on to say, and if one part rejoices, all rejoice together. So when I looked at your prayers in the card and the beauty of the flowers, I knew that you were rejoicing with me. And then I remembered a line from the Letter to the Philippians: “for I am confident, that God who began I good work in us, will continue it to the day of Jesus Christ.”

Thank you as well, to those of you who sent individual cards. They were well-timed throughout April like a series of life rafts, life rafts to hope and healing. Thank you for a hearty meal and attempts to help me even further. Each of your cards and prayers were individual musical notes that collectively created a hymn of praise to God’s good work

Following the musical metaphor, the Persian poet from the 14th century, Hafiz, speaks to us, of HOLEY, that's H-O-L-E-Y love. "I am the hole in a flute that the Christ's breath moves through – listen to this music". Beloved, when you and I are most open, transparent, and connected, Christ's breath moves through, between and among us. All we of us are like holes in a flute through which Christ's breath moves. Christ's breath moves through and among us, filling us with the delights of divine, HOLEY love.

Why do you and I come to church? Sure, many of us come out of custom and for the chance to be with friends, and to do good work with and through our church family. But we also come so that we can yet again experience the breath of Christ's love blowing through us. Sometimes Christ's breath lovingly tousles our hair. Other times, when each of us sings our individual note, we elevate one another to heights of heavenly love. This is what Jesus did when he shared the Last Supper with the disciples. He sang them a love song, that we still hear and sing today.

Thank you, my Sycamore family, for your love and prayers. Thank you for giving me the time my body has needed for healing. I still have a ways to go and need to be careful what I lift, but through God's grace and by the power of your prayers, I am home with you. God has much good work for us to do together. And for that, I give our Wholly, Holy, Holey God thanks and praise. Amen.