



## For All The Saints

### *Rector's State of the Parish Address 2020*

In his novel, 'The Plague', Albert Camus wrote the following, "*They knew now that if there is one thing one can always yearn for, and sometimes attain, it is human love.*" Of all of the gifts of life that we might become aware of in these extraordinary times, love is the one that seems to me to lie at the center of who we are called to be as followers of Jesus Christ.

We preach that God is love. We teach the ways of loving others to our children in Sunday school. We embody that love through our lives of service that seek to meet the needs of neighbors near and far. All of this was already true of who we knew ourselves to be as a parish. Yet, it has taken this present hour of our life as a church to reveal to us the depth and significance of love, and what that means for the kind of lives that God calls us to lead.

There will be many lessons for us all to draw, all across the world, from the time when the human family confronted the coronavirus. In thinking of those lessons, I have wondered what might be most pressing for us to keep at the forefront of our minds. As I have thought about that, I have found myself returning over and over to the preeminence of love, not as a vague feeling of affection for other people, or even for ourselves, but as a living and divine connection.

I have seen that love flow among you as a parish. At the start of this global health crisis and our season of suspending in-person gatherings, a team of parishioners talked to over 650 people on the phone. That remarkable team of just 30 people reached out not only to pass on information, but also to be a living connection from one life to another, and thus embodied in that moment what it means to call ourselves a church that is indeed for all the saints. In the weeks that followed those calls, staff and a pool of volunteers have essentially stayed on the line: reaching out with phone calls, texts, emails, and notes in the mail to as many of us as we could. Those calls had so much within them: tears, laughter, requests for prayer, offers of support, and most fundamentally of all, someone else whose life was inclined to them on the other end. I have seen the same happen across our worship services online and in our formation classes for children, youth and adults: the substance of the loving connection is what has mattered most, whatever form the connection has taken.

What I have seen emerge here is the utter centrality of the mission of the church as a people who build community with one another, continually attending to the bonds of affection we hold in common. Each call, each request for prayer online, each moment set aside to listen to the voice and word of another human life has acted to build up one another and the fellowship that we share.

With this, there has been another essential lesson: that now dispersed across many places and people we are not entirely sure who the 'we' of our body now is. We are more than we had been before. People are making church with us from across the city, the state, the nation and even the world. We are discovering connections to one another that we hitherto had not fully realized we had. We are being enlarged and enriched by those whom we have yet to meet in the flesh—yet in the Spirit, God makes us one.

Herein lies the quality of the love we are called to live into: that we might be one with another through God's amazing gift of grace. That the substance of our lives, whatever the form, might be that of people who are inclined to the lives of others for the building up of the body that is all of our neighbors. Such an orientation to life is a potent force for social cohesion that has the capacity to lead us through the current state of this crisis and its aftermath. This orientation has the power to change us, to transform us through God's self-giving love, and to re-orient us to who and how we are in the world.

For us, as the people of a church that is blessed with so much, the question is this: how can we take the power of love to build connections between us and with wider society? Where can we offer not simply our financial resources, but our time, our skills and experiences, our connections and counsel, our patience and commitment, to the people of this city we now are called to love even more fully than we had before?

I am particularly mindful of those who suffer most in the face of this pandemic. I am concerned about those who are especially likely to fall victim to this virus, those with limited to no practical access to quality healthcare and healthy food, and those with a severely limited ability to isolate from others in homes or in shelters. I am thinking of people who previously relied on working two or more jobs to make ends meet and now find themselves on the precipice of unemployment, deepening debt, and the inability to pay housing costs. And for all of us, my heart grieves for families of all sorts who will lose loved ones. Mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, grandparents and grandchildren will all be mourned, and their absences felt for a generation to come.

So who are we to be for this city of Atlanta in such a time as this?

As we studied our history at the beginning of this year, we told one another the story of a church that time and again saw the challenges of the day, dug deep, and rose to meet them. I give thanks for the tenacity and courage of the saints of years gone by; for their faithfulness and perseverance. I call us now to rise again.

Over the coming month, we will invite you to join together to help meet the needs of those around us in this city who are facing profound challenges. We will encourage you to rally to support healthcare workers, social service providers, our core ministries of Midtown Assistance Center, Threads, Covenant Community and Refugee Ministries, and new partners that seek to make a difference for good in Atlanta and beyond. The form of that work will vary, as you vary as the saints of this church. Some might be momentary touch-points, and others might become relationships that last for the long-term. Yet in the Spirit that binds us to one another and as a church choosing to live in ways that build up our common life as a city, we will be changed.

We will continue to love one another with all we've got, letting that love spill over into the world around us. We will discern as a church how God calls us deeper into who we already are. We will give thanks, always, for this indescribable gift of life. And together we will rise. One faith, one hope, accompanied by the God whose singular and faithful love for us will never let us go.

So, keep the faith, dear saints of God. Do not be disheartened nor discouraged, for the Lord our God is with you, wherever you may go.

Let us pray,

*'Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory. May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us, so we and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.'*