

## Newsletter Reflections for April

As I write this reflection we are about to enter the last week of our Lenten journey which is called Holy Week. In reaction to Roman Catholic traditions, churches of the Reformation eliminated many of the rituals which surrounded this time of the year. As time has passed, it seems that may have led to some errors in the other direction. We are so much more ready to celebrate the approach of Christmas, although we do not direct as much attention to the Advent preparation leading up to it as we probably should. Because if we consider closely the message that God come to dwell with us to redeem us: that means the cross is present there at the infant's birth. Instead we look at the gifts of the Magi and move their presentation from Epiphany which happened two years later to be included with the shepherds at the manger. This makes this celebration more about "gifts" we get...Now that is not to in any way deny that God's coming to dwell among us, the offering of self which was made in Emmanuel is not an amazing gift of love which we will never be able to really comprehend...yet, what we have largely done is to clothe the cross embodied within the birth and coming so that it is hardly visible at all. In many parts of the world, mainly those where Roman Catholicism is still strong, the season of Lent and the coming of Easter is a much more Holy and celebrated event. In those countries you do not see Easter bunnies or eggs, although there are ways that they can be interpreted to represent elements of the Easter story of new life and resurrection. When I was on a trip with the first President of Union at Charlotte, Rev. Dr. Tom Currie, which made a tour of important Reformation sites. At one of the stops, he made a comment which has stayed with me ever since. He remarked that the Reformation movement chose to use as its symbol the empty cross, whereas the Roman Church often uses the crucifix in the sanctuary. The empty cross is the symbol of Christ's victory over death, the Easter morning resurrection. Dr. Currie pointed out that if we only see it, if we only think of the joy and the glory, then it is easy to forget the pain and suffering represented by the crucifix. That pain and suffering, which was just as real for the man Jesus who was born and walked among us and knew that was his mission when he was teaching what to be a citizen of the kingdom means, is an important revelation of the depth of God's love which we need to remember. Jesus's call for his disciples to live a life which would entail self-denial was described as being willing to bear a cross...to be willing to put the welfare of others ahead of self-interest. When he asked his disciples to love as he loved he framed it as a new commandment. It was described as many of his teachings were a "raising of the bar" so to speak...a raising of the expectations of the ability of those who followed him to be able to do better than others had in the living out of the guidance given so long ago in the covenant God had revealed known as Torah. The guidance God had revealed as the ways to live abundant lives in community...those words spoken that we have called the Ten Commandments...Those words that Jesus himself summed up from two statements from Deuteronomy about loving God with all that you are and others as yourself. For many years, churches of the Reformed tradition, of which the Presbyterian denomination is a part, did not

take a journey through Lent but only celebrated Palm Sunday as Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and then the joyful discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning. That actually fits well with what Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers to as our tendency to like "cheap grace". If we ignore the events that take place on Maundy Thursday and what is termed either Black or Good Friday, then we can ignore the cost of the gift we receive...Our society really likes to ignore things that disturb our pleasure. Our culture really likes to ignore truths that disrupt what we want to do. This past year has been full of examples of that...and the cost that has accrued because of that behavior. So it seems very fitting that April begins this year with these two days on our calendar which focus on cost; chances to stop and consider what the cost of that empty tomb we will joyfully celebrate was; what that cost should mean going forward in our lives as we seek to live according to what our Lord asked of us: to love others as he loves us...with us being all those whom he loves, not just the select few that we think he should love. And in so loving, work toward those kingdom values which might mean some self-denial and cross bearing on our parts.

Shalom,

Pastor Libby