

Proper 12A sermon, July 23, 2020 Zoom Church during Pandemic
Genesis 29:15-28 * Psalm 105:1-11 * Romans 8:26-39 * Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
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I had the good fortune of spending my third year of seminary studying in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, a village on Lake Zurich about ten miles south of Zurich and overlooking the Swiss Alps. It was an amazing and transformative year. One of my favorite classes that year was a seminar on Depth Psychology and Religion.

On the first day of the seminar, when our professor was introducing the course and the books we would be studying, she did something I remember vividly. She picked up the three or four books we would be reading (one of them Carl Jung's *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*) and she held them up to her chest tightly, like she was hugging them, and she said, "I love these books . . . They are so dear to me because they changed the way I think. They helped transform who I am."

What a wonderful way to introduce a class! It definitely hooked me! How about you? Do you have books that you love? A book, or books, that has changed the way you think? Transformed who you are?

John Lewis' memoir, *Walking with the Wind* is one such book for me. I love this book. John Lewis even signed my copy in January of 2009! The people and the stories in the book changed me, changed the way I think, transformed me, or at least I hope it did. This book certainly helped me define who I aspire to be.

I read *Walking with the Wind* a few years after I completed seminary. Seminary was a deep dive into the Christian faith — tradition and practice — the sacred texts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, Hebrew, *Koine* Greek, theology, church history, Christian education, philosophy, ethics, hermeneutics, homiletics, world religions, pastoral care. I came away knowing, respecting, and loving Jesus, the Christ, in a deeper way. The essence of his life and teaching is the Way of Love: loving God, neighbor and oneself. Jesus summed up his teaching on the Way of Love in the phrase "the Kingdom of God." The Kingdom of God was Jesus' central teaching.

Our lesson today is on parables Jesus told about the Kingdom of God. He said the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, a pinch of yeast, a buried treasure, a precious pearl, a net cast into the sea.

And this Kingdom which he proclaimed is meant to come on earth, and it is in heaven. The Kingdom Christ proclaimed isn't pearly gates, angelic choirs, harps and streets of gold in the sky, bye and bye ... but the Kingdom of God is LOVE that takes shape and form and embodiment here — among us, within us, in our neighborhoods, workplaces, in our policies, our laws, institutions, in our world, now — today.

But, you know, ole' Jesus lived a long, long time ago. And the empire took him out, executed him, snuffed out a lot of his followers. We know, of course, by faith, that wasn't the end of the story. . . but sometimes it can all seem too long ago, too far away, too out of reach, too impossible. The Way of Love sometimes seems like a fairy tale not something that could truly be realized — especially in our vastly diverse and complicated twenty-first century world.

The book *Walking with the Wind* introduced me to a man named John Robert Lewis who was a young man, twenty-five years old, when I was born. Not that much older than me — and he lived only a few states away from my home on the coast of Virginia. He was the third of ten children born to sharecropping parents in a shotgun house in rural, very poor, Pikes County, Alabama. His great grandfather had been born into slavery near his hometown of Troy.

When Lewis was six, his parents gave him the responsibility of talking care of their sixty chickens. For Lewis, the henhouse was a holy place. He wrote that in the early mornings before he let them out into the yard, he would spoke to them gently, softly, as if hushing a crying baby. He went to extremes to give all his chickens tender and meticulous care. In the evenings he'd return the chickens to the henhouse; and they would all get very still and quiet. He then would regularly preach to them, reciting Bible verses and speaking to them as if they were his congregation. Because of this, his family gave him the nickname "Preacher."

The same sensitivity and compassion that John displayed to his chickens also manifested early on within him by his keen awareness of the inequalities and injustices all around him: the harshness and exploitation of sharecropping, the deprivation of basic school resources in the all-Black schools he attended, his bafflement and disturbance over the monuments to a lost Confederate Civil War spread throughout the landscape of his

childhood, and the local public library which refused to issue him a library card when he was sixteen years old, simply because he was Black.

One Sunday morning in 1955 he heard a sermon on a local radio station preached by a young minister named Martin Luther King, Jr. King said it wasn't enough for Black people to be concerned with getting into the gates of the Promised Land in the hereafter – but that we needed to be concerned about the gates of school that were closed to Black people and the doors of stores that refused to hire or serve Black people.

About this time, Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus and just fifty miles away, Dr. King led 50,000 black men and women in Montgomery in a non-violent, year-long, bus boycott demanding that Black people be treated with basic human dignity. Fourteen-year-old Emmitt Till was lynched, shot in the head and, with a seventy-five-pound cotton gin tied around his neck, thrown into the Tallahatchie River by a gang of white men — because he took a dare from his friends and said to a white woman behind the cash register, “Bye, baby” as he walked out of the store.

“What else could I do?”... He thought he was as good as any white man,” one of the men accused of murdering Till told a reporter. An all-white jury and white judge found the accused not guilty.

Lewis, aspiring to be a minister like King, enrolled in American Baptist Seminary in Nashville, and it was while there that he began attending classes in the basement of a Methodist Church taught by Rev. James Lawson. He said that in these classes he discovered what he'd been searching for his whole life: The Way of Love.

Lewis called the Way of Love, “Soul Force,” which is realized through non-violent redemptive suffering. He recognized it in the life and death of Jesus ... but also in the suffering that is carried out in every human being. Suffering is, he wrote, *“nothing more than a sad and sorry thing without the presence on the part of the sufferer of a graceful heart, an accepting open heart, a heart that holds no malice toward the inflictors of his or her suffering. It has everything to do with the way of nonviolence... we're talking about love here... not romantic love but a deeper, more all-encompassing love. It's a love that accepts and embraces the hateful and hurtful. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us, even in those who would raise their hand against us, those we might call the enemy... Pain, ugliness and fear can cover it over, turning a person toward anger and hate. It is the ability to see*

through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into themselves..." The Way of Love is realized only through the practice of nonviolent action.

In that church basement, Lewis and about ten others learned and practiced, learned and practiced, learned and practiced... this Way of Love. And the rest, we may say, is history:

- The formation of SNCC (the Southern Non-violent Coordinating Committee),
- The lunch-counter sit-ins in Nashville,
- The Freedom Rides into the deep south,
- Lewis, at age twenty-three, alongside *I-Have-A-Dream* King – speaking at the March on Washington,
- Arrested more than forty times in an effort to expose inequalities and injustices,
- The Voting Rights march from Selma to Montgomery,
- Lewis and peaceful marchers clubbed and whipped by state troopers on “Bloody Sunday.”
- The conscience of the nation at last pricked enough to pass The Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act,
- Then, thirty years of service in the U.S. House of Representatives, always engaged in making what Lewis called “Good Trouble” — fighting to preserve and build on the gains of the Civil Rights Movement.

In his life and witness, John Lewis held fast to the Way of Love. In the Church we do a lot of talking about the Way of Love – but so often we neglect or shy away from the essential component of Love taught by Jesus and Lewis: non-violence. Too often we think we can slip in some violence on the way to our shared goal of Love. But Lewis taught us that Love is Love all the way to Love. We don't get to support war or practice hate, or meanness or killing or slander or any sort of violence in our thoughts, words or deeds in the name of Love. Lewis liked to quote MLK: *“We've got to love people no matter what... Most of all... we must love the unlovable. Love the hell out them (literally). If there is hell in someone, if there is meanness and anger and hatred in them, we've got to love it out.”*

In his eighty years, Lewis loved the hell out of a lot of this world. Toward the end of their lives, three of Lewis' most hateful and vicious assaulters apologized to him: George Wallace, the Alabama segregationist Governor who ordered the police attack on Bloody Sunday; Bull Conner, the Birmingham Commissioner who allowed the brutal besiege of

Lewis and other Freedom Riders; and Elwin Wilson, the former Klansman who was part of a mob that beat Lewis in the head at a bus station in Fort Mill, South Carolina.

When each apologized, Lewis, without hesitation, accepted their apologies and offered them forgiveness. He said, *“This shows the power of love. Of grace. Of people when they are able to say, I am sorry We are all children of God.”*

Last month, in one of Lewis’ last press releases, written after the murder of George Floyd, Lewis encouraged protestors to resist the pull of violence, looting, and uncontrollable anger. *“I know your pain, your rage, your sense of despair and hopelessness... Justice has, indeed, been denied far too long. Rioting, looting, and burning is not the way. Organize. Demonstrate. Sit-in. Stand-up. Vote. Be constructive, not destructive. History has proven time and again that non-violent, peaceful protest is the way to achieve the justice and equality that we all deserve.”*¹

I believe, with our sanctified imaginations, we can all now see John Lewis leaning over the balcony of heaven cheering us on: *“Never grow weary of getting into good trouble... stay true to the Way of Love and the Beloved Community will come on earth as it is in heaven.”*

Blessed John Lewis, may you rest in peace and power. Amen.

¹ “Why John Lewis Matters” – Now More Than Ever, by Jimmie Briggs, *Vanity Fair Magazine*, July 20, 2020.