

Over the last two days the people of the Upstate NY Synod have gathered in assembly to do the work of the church. We worshipped together, considered important resolutions and listened to a variety of presentations. We elected a new bishop, the Rev. Lee Miller II, to lead us into the future.

We brought into these deliberations a wide range of understandings of what it means to be Christ's church in these days. And just like everyone else, we began living out 'the time after the great shut down of 2020, after the forced shift from in person to digital, after a divided election. We tried to discern where God is calling us to be now that the world has turned.

We considered some difficult questions.

What is God calling this church to do in the face of persistent racism that has crippled the last 400 years of American history and countless lives?

How are we genuinely to welcome new neighbors from diverse backgrounds – so their lives and our lives might be enriched by the gifts they bring to us?

What are we to do about the deep seated poverty not only of our inner cities but hidden in pockets in our most rural areas as well?

How do we take steps forward in accepting each individual for who they are instead of expecting them to look and act according to our stereotypes?

All of these things challenge us with the same question: how do we love one another as Christ has loved us?

It is good to remember that this is a question about love = God's love for us and our love for one another. Love is a risky business which requires courage and persistence, and we know that even in the best of times, we lack courage and strength. ....And it most certainly hasn't been the best of times.

And we are not the best of people.

So, just as we do each Sunday we begin this new journey with confession – speaking the truth about ourselves – not to God who already knows the very number of hairs on our head, but to ourselves. We own up to who we truly are, we face as much of our own reality as possible so that the life giving love of God in Christ Jesus might be absorbed into the deepest parts of our being and we might become forebearers of the kingdom.

It is a terribly difficult thing to do = this confession thing. The mythical Adam confesses to God from behind the bushes in the garden of Eden: I heard you coming and I was afraid because I was naked and so I hid.

I was afraid because I was naked.....stark words that describe this act of truth telling. Our blustering is silenced and our rationalizations are wiped away. Just the very word – naked – leaves us a bit embarrassed and uncomfortable. It is too raw a word for the polite company of church gatherings and too powerful a word for the faint of heart who stand before God.

But we understand the emotions. Whether it was no more serious than a cookie stolen for a snack before dinner, we remember that moment when we were caught out – when we stood before the authority of the kitchen with crumbs on our face. Oh yes, we understand Adam well,

because we too have been afraid because we were revealed in all our naked truth.

Every one of us has spent time looking for a bush to hide behind. We look for a middle path, a half way measure. We want to protect our reputations and our possessions and our privileges – whatever they may be. We hide behind such defenses as

“What can you expect of me, that’s the way I was raised” or

“I don’t know any of those people” and

the most insidious ‘oh, don’t be so serious, I was only kidding’

Instead of speaking truth, instead of doing the hard work of confronting reality, we have lengthy discussions about wearing masks and which hymns to sing and the most mindless of all – what color the candles should be in advent. Like Adam we say, “I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid”

Oh yes, we understand our fear, our avoidance of embarrassing, difficult truths.

What we don’t understand is the depth of God’s love – the love of a mother cradling a colicky baby, the love of a friend protecting us from bullies, or a neighbor who drags us out of a burning house.

It is a love which does not examine the balance sheets nor weigh the odds but pours itself out for our sake. Its power far exceeds any super hero for the love of God is stronger than death itself.

In the power of that love, God calls Christ’s church to confront the evils that assail our community, to take up the difficult work of dismantling oppression and lifting our neighbor out of the muck of this world.

God is calling us to focus on the love and not on the packaging, to focus on what lies at the heart of God's creation and not on the trappings of sentiment, custom, comfort or personal opinion.

Paradise ends with the third chapter of Genesis. Adam and Eve now step into a world that we know all too well, where relationships are fractured and God too often seems far away. But the story continues from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to a tree on a hill called Calvary, where a naked and dying thief cries out and is promised, once again, the paradise he had lost.

Beloved children of God, we have important work ahead of us. May the eternal love of God power your days and your deeds.