

Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Jeremiah 17:7-8, Mark 2:1-12 (NRSVUE)
June 25, 2023

What's Love Got to Do with It: Listening for the Sound of the Genuine

The flight was packed. People from all over the world, speaking many different languages. I heard Arabic and French, Swahili and Spanish, English and Turkish. I was on a flight from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia to Istanbul with the Tree of Life Journey heading -eventually-home...Exhausted from our powerful travels, I found my aisle seat and fell into it for the long flight. Quite delighted not to know a soul around me. Just as I opened my book and adjusted my water bottle in the seat pocket, I heard an unpleasant gurgling sound coming from the guy ahead of me and I felt myself grumble inwardly...what now?

A young twentysomething was clearly having trouble breathing and the ragged noise of his lungs was loud even with my ear plugs in.

Then, I watched as a father, moved his son gently, so gently limb by rigid limb to the row across the aisle from me and spread him out lengthwise on the seats. A fellow traveler moved his seat to make more room for the family so they now had the whole row. Two flight attendants brought an oxygen machine and helped to carefully place it over the young man's jaundiced face and nose the rush of the machine, his deep cough was overwhelming...

Suddenly, as people settled into their seats, I felt the air around me shift. A wave of compassion seemed to flow through the cabin as everyone around us as began to sense what was going on -and what was needed. My heart softened and I observed my fellow travelers offering help to this parent hovering over his son. Someone offered an extra pillow, and a blanket was passed back. "Sucran, Sucran" thank you, thank you responded the father. Over the next 4 hours, the ill person shifted and moaned and struggled to breathe, I realized I probably wasn't the only one holding her breath...hoping he'd make it through.

It seemed that a community had formed around this family, as those of us nearest them stayed vigilant to the ways we might help as we flew through the night. A cup of water here, a blanket there, an extra pillow. We were on a pilgrimage of care together, cloaking this father and son with compassion. While we never spoke, I hoped this beleaguered father knew that he and his child were being held in wide arms of mercy all the way home.

This experience has remained in my heart a gospel story, depicting a love, both communal and personal, an Agape love, Agape being the highest form of love... that transformed a fraught moment into a sacramental one and did not waver in the face of suffering.

Our scripture today of the paralytic raised up by the community around him and brought to Jesus is another such story of what love can do- and how we actively participate in the story of the grace and healing of one another. Archbishop Desmond Tutu preached that we were all made in the image of God and thus, "God-carriers" of each other.

As we just heard in the text, the 4 neighbors were just that-bearing the marginalized person- to Jesus. I'm struck by how those folks in the crowd, perhaps strangers to the person on the stretcher as well as to one another, were moved by compassion to change their place and position in the crowd as they carry "the other" to Jesus. They love beyond themselves crossing all kinds of spatial and communal boundaries in the process.

As the passage unfolds, we read that they carried the person forward through the crowd, and seeing no other way they climbed onto the roof, they even dug a hole through the roof- and got their hands dirty before lowering the person on the mat to Jesus.

The deeds of love and justice are often hands-on physical labor. The "other" on the stretcher is now centered before Jesus, laid out right where the action is -and given agency. In fact, he's instructed by Jesus to "stand up and walk on." A new path to life set before him should he choose to take it.