

**“In One Another’s Hands”**

Rev. David Gregory

March 22, 2020

Lent 4



**First reading**

*Pandemic*

by Lynn Ungar, 3/11/20

What if you thought of it  
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—  
the most sacred of times?

Cease from travel.

Cease from buying and selling.

Give up, just for now,  
on trying to make the world  
different than it is.

Sing. Pray. Touch only those  
to whom you commit your life.  
Center down.

And when your body has become still,  
reach out with your heart.  
Know that we are connected  
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.  
(You could hardly deny it now.)

Know that our lives  
are in one another’s hands.  
(Surely, that has come clear.)

Do not reach out your hands.

Reach out your heart.

Reach out your words.

Reach out all the tendrils  
of compassion that move, invisibly,  
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love--  
for better or for worse,  
in sickness and in health,  
so long as we all shall live.

**Second reading**

*1 Corinthians 13:5-7*

from *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson

Love never gives up.

Love cares more for others than for self.

Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have.

Love doesn’t strut,

Doesn’t have a swelled head,

Doesn’t force itself on others,

Isn’t always “me first,”

Doesn’t fly off the handle,

Doesn’t keep score of the sins of others,

Doesn’t revel when others grovel,

Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,

Puts up with anything,

Trusts God always,

Always looks for the best,

Never looks back,

But keeps going to the end.

It gives me great joy to speak with you today. When one is accustomed to standing in front of a gathering of people each week, it feels unusual and maybe even a little painful to be looking at a computer instead of your faces. Actually, I'm looking at my own face and watching myself talk, which carries its own built-in discomfort. We're living in a completely new world, one that shifts daily. And with every day that goes by, I grow more convinced that whatever emerges for us during this time will alter the way we do everything from now on. In other words, life will never be quite the same again, and it's just fine. When the time comes that we can get back into our church building, all of us together in a room, I don't think we'll ever take those gatherings for granted.



Over the past few days many of you have been sharing poems, blog posts, memes, and videos with me via email, and I love that you're doing that. Please don't stop. I can't possibly keep up with all that's out there, and if something comes your way that speaks to you, I'd like to see it or hear about it, and have you tell me why it struck you. This past week at least five of you shared a poem with me entitled *Pandemic*, written by Lynn Ungar, and dated March 11. It was after I had received it the third time that I decided it had to be a reading for this Sunday.

Lynn Ungar is a Unitarian Universalist minister who is based in San Francisco, but her church, which is called Church of the Larger Fellowship, is entirely online. That fact in and of itself is worthy of our consideration and reflection, but for today I am focused on these words of hers that begin with a comparison of "Shelter in Place" with the Jewish Sabbath. It's not a comparison that I would have thought of, at least not automatically, but from the moment I first saw it, it felt perfect.

Earlier this past week, as I began to wrap my head around the prospect of being sequestered—more or less—in my own home, there was something inside me that secretly rejoiced. It contained a little bit of the energy we would associate with a snow day, an officially sanctioned, totally ok, government-approved time of playing hooky. If anyone took you to task for your laziness you could just say, "It's not my fault. I have to stay home. I can't do anything about it." What is it about American life that makes us feel guilty for taking a Sabbath? Why are we so obsessed with productivity that we find it increasingly difficult to sit still, or if we do happen to sit still, to also unplug?

When it comes to "Shelter in Place," Lynn Ungar is simply asking us, "What if ... ?" What if we were to look at this time for what it offers us, rather than for what it is taking away? Within the parameters of what is considered healthy and wise, what might this experience bring us that we would have otherwise missed entirely? What if this became far more than any Lenten observance or a much larger container than any Advent season? What if this time of sequester became as sacred as any Sabbath could be, to disconnect us from all the urgent things that occupy our attention, energy and focus each and every day? What if we just take the words, "and on the seventh day, God rested," and let them enter into the core of our being to nourish us and to give us peace and calm in what can easily become a storm of anxiety? And let us not forget that this *is* a time of intense anxiety. Huge sections of our population, particularly those who work in service industries, those who wait tables, or hourly workers, part-time workers who work with few if any benefits, all kinds of people who may live from paycheck to paycheck are quickly facing some dire circumstances that we all need to help mediate. As the poem says, our lives are literally in each other's hands. This is because the virus might be on our hands, but in a figurative sense it might

be our hands that contain the solution. Whether we touch hands or not, we are connected in ways that are both “terrifying” and “beautiful.” This was true before the corona virus and it will be true long after.

If we become convinced of anything at all in this time of social distancing, it will be that we are utterly and completely interdependent. We are, as the apostle says, “members one of another.” We are connected by love, as expressed in the first letter to the Corinthians, and beautifully interpreted by Eugene Peterson.

*Love never gives up.  
Love cares more for others than for self.  
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.  
Love doesn't strut,  
Doesn't have a swelled head,  
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Doesn't revel when others grovel,  
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,  
Puts up with anything,  
Trusts God always,  
Always looks for the best,  
Never looks back,  
But keeps going to the end.*

And in the present moment, that is the love that expresses itself in respectful distance as described by Lynn Ungar.

*Do not reach out your hands.  
Reach out your heart.  
Reach out your words.  
Reach out all the tendrils  
of compassion that move, invisibly,  
where we cannot touch.  
Promise this world your love--  
for better or for worse,  
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so long as we all shall live.*

I'm ready to see where this ultimately takes us. It won't be easy to get there, but we will. And we will get there by learning to love in ways that we never knew we could.