

SERMON – Transformational Love      Reverend Kristina Stone Kaiser

By show of hands: How many of you have ever shared something that felt highly personal, vulnerable or difficult, only to feel as if the person you were sharing with didn't hold what you were saying with care and compassion? Maybe they tried to make a joke. Maybe they told you to look on the bright side. I would imagine we've all had this experience. And maybe just call it out if you have an answer: How did that make you feel when that happened? Yes. When we don't feel seen, understood, or supported, we call this emotional loneliness. And in the circles I'm a part of, one of the standards we live by is to work to create this thing called emotional safety – spaces where people can feel secure and trusting, because there is acceptance within the relationship and within the environment. And this isn't just a nice little thing. It turns out that this is a foundational human need. Feelings of acceptance and belonging are important to us all. In our Scripture readings for today, we are told to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. In our 2nd Scripture Reading, we're promised by Jesus that the suffering of this world is not the whole story. Jesus extends to us the call to offer mercy and become peacemakers. He charges us to consider what it means to live righteously and to pursue pureness of heart. Just this week, as I take in the news, what do I see and hear? I hear people groups being singled out by their countries of origin. I'm told to be distrustful of these people and to not desire to have them walking among us because they are not good people. This is a problem for me. It reminds me of another moment in my life when I was pastoring a church in the Boston area. I'm reminded of a congregation member, crying because her country of origin had been spoken of so poorly. These ill comments put out to the public do not create spaces where people can feel secure and accepted. And when these types of statements go out into the world, if we get enough people to agree with us that "those people over there" are less-than in some way – then we can create an atmosphere that justifies a lack of concern for others' wellbeing. And when we shift from the global view – it turns out that we can also see this occur in our day-to-day experiences of living as well. We can see it in our local communities, our work conversations, our friend groups... This act of choosing to prioritize group loyalty, conforming to collective norms, and adopting aggressive, defiant attitudes in order to gain status or protection...these are all examples of what we call gang mentality. And in a way, because we're all experiencing emotional loneliness and trying to avoid that, gang mentality, whether we're aware of it or not, can occur as a way of trying to create that sense of felt safety and security.

But the truth of the matter is that we don't have to participate in it. We can be the one that connects with the words of the beatitudes. We can choose to break the cycle. We can be the one who says, "In this moment, right here and right now, I choose love. I choose kindness. I choose to see you." But here's the thing: This is easier said than done. Every person – every person in this room, every person watching online, every person we know and every person we don't know – is susceptible to responding out of our trauma over and above what we've been taught about love. Take, for instance, this teaching on "the meek." We are told by Jesus that "the meek will inherit the earth." Well...what does that word mean to us? We may wonder if gentleness and mild-manneredness is going to work...which is a reasonable question. And in fact, the Greek word for "meek" that we see in Matthew 5 is actually defined as "strength under control," meaning you have power, you are aware of that power, and you use that power in wise ways. If we look to the life of Jesus again, perhaps we might consider his actions in John 8, verses 5-7. In that passage, we're told that a mob of angry people come to him, all ready to stone a woman for her wrongdoing. Gang mentality is strong in that moment. They believe that they have the upper-hand, that they are right. They are good – and this woman is not. The exact passage says this: John 8:5-7 (NIV) In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Now...we could place ourselves in this story in any number of ways. On some days, maybe we are the ones who believe we know what is right. In another moment, we may be the one people are coming to as they seek justice. For certain, on some days, we will be the one that people are ready to stone. Every story in this passage is our story. But if we just freeze frame this interaction for a moment, notice what Jesus does. In the midst of a horrible, high-pressure, emotional situation where the accusations are flying like mad, he doesn't just jump right in. ...and this is important because sometimes we feel like we have to. People are demanding our response. What are we going to say and do? What is right action in this moment? Everyone is waiting on Jesus for an answer, and he's drawing in the dirt with his finger. This pause that Jesus offers is important information for us. The practice of pause helps us return to the words of the beatitudes and of Micah, chapter 6. Jesus models for us a measured response – a meek response – one that is strong but controlled. Jesus' response calls for the group to see the humanity of

the person in front of them. His response also calls for them to see their own humanity. It invites the crowd into the practice of mercy. But the million-dollar question is: How do we do this in our world right now? Several years ago now, I read Brene Brown's book, "Braving the Wilderness." In chapter 4, she talks about this thing called "Conflict Transformation." And in that chapter, she suggests that the practice of Conflict Transformation is even better than the practice of Conflict Resolution. She says, with resolution, the goal is to return to a previous state affairs. And at times, maybe this is, in fact, what we want. But in many instances, returning to the way things were isn't what's needed. Oftentimes, what is needed is to create deeper levels of understanding. We need perspective. We need to be able to see one another in a way that goes beyond where we've been in the past. I need to care about you – what you're experiencing and feeling – what your needs are – what your traumas are. I need to hear the stories that have brought you to this moment. What do you care about? Who do you care about? And at this moment in time – we are collectively standing in need of conflict transformation. Now, this will seem like a change of subject, but stay with me. As some of you will know, my doctoral project involved asking the question: Can we increase our quality of life where joy is concerned? And in order to answer that question, one of the sub-questions was: Can employing a daily 10-minute practice help with this? So I created a 90-day journey that did just this: 90 days of 10-minute practices. The people who agreed to participate in this journey, then graciously took tons and tons of surveys and met with me several times over the course of those 90 days. And when I sat down to analyze what had happened, I found myself stunned. People reported feeling up to 40% better in up to 6 areas of their lives. But, maybe in contrast to what you might think, increasing joy in everyday life ends up involving taking the time to do some meaningful internal work. In fact, in one of the first weeks of the journey, one of the participants emailed me and said, "I don't feel joyful after doing today's practice. Am I supposed to?" And like so many other things in life, the answer was essentially, "It's complicated." In order to experience joy, we have to tend to the whole of ourselves. This means we can't stuff our negative emotions somewhere inside of us. If we're feeling sad, angry, isolated, depressed, anxious...whatever it is...trying to ignore it or wait for it to "just go away" won't work. In fact, it will often make it worse. And where joy is concerned, if we are teaching ourselves to repress any one emotion, we're going to ultimately teach ourselves to repress the good ones, too. So...do we want to name what hurts and what outrages us? Yes! And also...And this is really important for moments like the ones we're living in now...it is equally

important to see and name what is good in our lives. What is beautiful in your life? Where do you see love and acts of kindness? Sometimes, the struggle is that we aren't naming the difficult. But at other times, we may become tunnel visioned, hyper-focused on the difficult to the point that it feels wrong to us to have emotions like happiness or joy. Balance is important. If we do not allow ourselves both of these things, we are very likely to become bitter and struggle to live out this call towards love, kindness, justice, and relational connection. And again, this is easier said than done. But I came across some inspiration that I want to share with you. Some of you will know Valerie Kaur. We read her book, "See No Stranger" in the monthly book group that meets on the 3rd Thursday mornings of the month. If you don't know her, Valerie Kaur is a woman who lives in the L.A. area. Her grandfather immigrated to America from India and worked as a farmer. She was instrumental in bringing about the documentary Divided We Fall: Americans in the Aftermath. And to this day, she runs a nonprofit called The Revolutionary Love Project. I bring her up today because she was in Minneapolis last week. In fact, she spoke last Sunday to a group of people. I found her words inspiring, and so I share a few excerpts of her speech with you today. She said: Valerie Kaur – Sunday, January 25, 2026 in Minneapolis (Excerpts) We are here to love each other, to care for each other, to keep each other safe and whole...What I have seen here in Minneapolis this week has brought me to my knees –a display of humanity that I have never witnessed before...people creating networks of care, block by block, heart to heart, with a speed, proficiency, and creativity unlike anything I have seen in my life...Minnesota, you have created...a web of people who care, and it looks like all of us: queer and straight, religious and secular, people of all colors and backgrounds...We carry each other through the impossible. Revolutionary Love is the choice to see no stranger, to leave no one outside of our circle of care, to risk ourselves for one another...We are part of a song of love that began long ago with our ancestors and will only get louder...We are practicing the world we want in the space between us. We are living into the dream of a world that is green and whole, safe and free. For I see your child as mine, and you see mine as yours...To immigrant families, we see you. We love you. We will keep fighting for you...And, because no one is outside of our circle of care, to ICE agents everywhere: You have a choice. Revolutionary Love means blocking your actions with one hand, and extending the other with the hope that you will one day take it. Or your children will take it. For the brief high of domination is nothing compared to the infinite love and joy of true community. Valerie Kaur's observations and message ring with the themes from today's scripture

readings. Her words call us to pursue justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. Her message calls us to uncover the ways in which the Kingdom of God is evident in our midst. It calls us to respond meekly – with controlled strength. It calls us to be peacemakers, to be merciful, and pure in heart. And also, it calls us to mourn with those who mourn – to see one another in our pain and suffering – and to care. What does it look like to live out these calls we are hearing today? What does it look like to move towards real transformation – where we can see and understand one another at deeper levels? What is needed in this moment now? At what point will the moment call for slowing down – for bending over and drawing in the sand? My friend and co-worker often quotes author Bayo Akomolafe who tells us: The times are urgent. Let us slow down. Let us slow down so that we can treat all people with care and love, so that we can recognize herd mentality and be part of stopping the trend. Let us slow down so that we can see when we are operating out of our trauma and our fears. Let us slow down so that we can find deeper mutual understanding.

Rohr Daily Meditation Jan 15, 2020.

But the gift of contemplative practice is the ability to remain humble and hold the tension between the rightness and wrongness on each side of the issue until the Spirit moves in and offers us a wiser course of action. Richard Rohr tells us: It's not your way. It's not my way. But maybe there's an "our way." A third option. And! He says, you get there not by tons of words. Instead, he says, you get there by stopping the flow of words, by getting still, by waiting for the spirit to speak...which is very likely what Jesus was doing when he bent down in the sand. What will it look like for us to persistently ask one another:- What kind of shared future can we create together? Loneliness has become a well-documented problem in our world. This is true in the physical sense. It is also true in the emotional sense as well. To find ourselves at any kind of a turning point, we are going to need to be able to ask the tough questions:

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to go?
- And how are we going to get there?

To quote Valerie Kaur again:

We are here to love each other, to care for each other, to keep each other safe and whole...Revolutionary Love is the choice to see no stranger, to leave no one outside of our circle of care, to risk ourselves for one another...We are part of a song of love that began long ago with our ancestors and will only get louder...We are practicing the

world we want in the space between us. We are living into the dream of a world that is green and whole, safe and free. For I see your child as mine, and you see mine as yours...the brief high of domination is nothing compared to the infinite love and joy of true community. I don't know what this looks like in everyday life for you. But I know that God's love is present in our midst.

As some of you will know, a lot of my time these days is spent in rehearsals for the Come From Away production which happens this week. Within the show there's this song, "Prayer," a moment where Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus are all praying together. And I can't understand the why and the how, but as each of us prays the prayers of these traditions – I feel the power of the Holy Spirit. That is Divine Mystery, and I can't explain it, but it's sending a powerful message. I don't have to understand it. I don't have to know everything there is to know. But clearly, the lives of all people matter to God. And so may the lives of all people matter to me. May they matter to you. And where we come up against our own limitations, may God's love become even stronger. This is what Scripture promises us – that our weakness is not a problem for the love of God.

God of Love, as we are gathered here today, heal our hearts that we might live into the glorious light – into the coming near of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let your glory fall, and may it transform us. In Jesus' Name, Amen