

Genesis 1-2:4 New International Version (NIV)

**1** In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup>Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. <sup>3</sup>And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. <sup>4</sup>God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

Acts 19:1-7 New International Version (NIV)

**19** While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples <sup>2</sup>and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." <sup>3</sup>So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. <sup>4</sup>Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." <sup>5</sup>On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup>When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. <sup>7</sup>There were about twelve men in all.

Mark 1:4-11 New International Version (NIV)

<sup>4</sup>And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup>John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup>I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." <sup>9</sup>At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

“Spoken into Goodness”  
The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee  
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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

One of my best friends and I reconnected about fifteen years ago after having been only sporadically in touch over nearly as many years. I imagine many of you know something of the gift of long friendships, in which whole families sometimes get wrapped up in the affection, and extended family stories certainly become part of the history you share. One of the ways in which I have gotten to know my friend even better as an adult has been learning more about his childhood. I learned explanations for some of the ways he had struggled from time to time lifelong. Some have saddened me, and some have given me hope not only for him in an ongoing way, but also for others and for the possibility of change.

A sad fact I learned in a passing comment struck me particularly hard and has deepened my respect for my friend. Although his mother has always been lavish in her words of affection, including to me, he has never heard his father tell him he loves him. Some years ago, when I popped in to visit his mom and dad, I found his father home alone, and he was very, unusually chatty with me. I took this as an opportunity to ask the hard question, and I think I should share that I asked it with some anger simmering in me. I know that his keeping his affection to himself has been hurtful. So, I shared with him that I know he has never spoken the words “I love you” to his son, and that I believed were he to do so, he would soothe a thousand wounds. I’m sure that I didn’t phrase it exactly like that, but the meaning carried. My friend’s dad told me something that has baffled me ever since, because I truly cannot understand how it could be possible. He told me that each

time he knows one or more of his children is coming to visit, he plans to say “I love you,” but that when it comes to a moment in which it makes sense, he just can’t. I do not understand how this could be so, and I continue to hope and pray that he will voice his affection and respect at some time while there is still time.

Despite the truth of this and of a relationship that has always been one-sided, my friend continues to be a good son, and a loving, demonstrative father and grandfather. I am proud of him. He has made a choice to love, even when the love apparently is not returned. For my part, I continue to visit my friend’s parents (pre-Covid anyway), and I try to draw his father into the warmth that others enjoy in his mom’s presence. But it’s hard, because I know how much it would mean to my friend to hear his father tell him that he loves and respects him.

Why tell this story? I have found that the greatest challenge in getting together with my friend’s father from time to time is not how he behaves or what he says to me. In fact, he is almost uniquely open and kind with me, or so says my friend’s siblings. The challenge to me is in how *I feel* when I am with him. I remain angry with him for the more direct abuse I’ve heard about, and if I am honest with myself, it is hard to love him. I just don’t get it. I imagine I’m not the only one who sometimes has a hard time loving everyone. There are certainly individuals who do not draw out your best compassion, and perhaps who even deserve your ire, even your disrespect. And still, we are called to love . . . Some people are just so hard to love, aren’t they? Jesus gave us a task, and it is not an easy one: love our enemies.

On day three of the course I have taught in world religions, I would ask kids to write about someone they dislike, or even feel they hate. I ask them to consider an

enemy, and then I ask them what would help them to feel compassion for them. They would write in response to considering what in that person's life could help them to feel compassion for them, and therefore to help them--perhaps not like that person--but to love them. In the past several years, I have learned tremendous lessons from my students as they wrote about family members, about former friends and about more public figures.

Those lessons may help all of us now. How do we respond to violence, sometimes mistakenly even in Jesus' name (not for the first time)? We love. Believe me, I am having to get pretty creative this week to think of how to love people who find destruction both humorous and somehow justified. No more of this, said Jesus, and I want to cry it out in the public square. I know that many of you are similarly concerned and are similarly conflicted. But we are not in it alone. God is with us in spirit. How often do we say that?

<sup>4</sup>Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." <sup>5</sup>On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup>When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied." So, I guess this morning I would like for us to wonder to what we will lend our prophetic voice, and we hear an encouraging word. We are not in this alone. God's creative, loving Spirit is with us and will remain with us.

It may be that some of you have read the story of creation from Genesis so many times that its words are solidly in your memory. Maybe you have read explanations of it that have made you believe more strongly in the sense of God as creator, or have grown to challenge the story as myth rather than a "real" account. I would share that I have a deep sense of the Bible being a "true story" of God's

relationship with humanity. We may get some of the words, some of the details wrong, but we read a story that begins with creativity, relationship and love. One of the benefits of waiting until middle age to attend seminary was to have grown comfortable enough in my theology to rest comfortably in my faith, and not to be too comfortable that I was beyond convincing otherwise about some of its details.

A little detail in the first words of scripture we hear has changed how I understand our role in creation. Yes, I said “*our* role in creation.” We read most often a translation that says, “God created,” while the Hebrew *may* be read “While God was creating.” The tasks are interrupted—by change in purpose in the various activities—and then by sabbath rest. I love the lesson this reading has to teach us about where God is now. Genesis is the story of a God who did not only create, but IS creating, daily, and as people of faith, that work can be done in us and through us. We have even chosen this sensibility as the UCC slogan, “God is still speaking.” So, what does love look like?

Sometimes it looks like righteous indignation. Think about the term: righteous indignation. What does action in the name of righteousness look like? What does a spirit filled, loving response to righteous anger look like? It looks like love, even when we are moved to criticism, to condemnation, to fiery anger.

With our children, we don’t let them “get their way,” but we do love them, no matter what. We listen to them. We keep suggesting what will be a better, safer, more fulfilling path forward, even when they are exasperating. And then we consider what they are feeling, what they are going through. Like as a Father—like as a mother—full of compassion, we keep showing them what we know to be a loving way forward. We trust that we work with them to create lives of love. We tell them they are loved. They are blessed in our sight. At Jesus’ baptism, God

looked upon him and called him out as his son, with whom he was pleased.  
Mustn't Jesus' heart have sung to know he was supported?

And now I want to make it plain: proud boys want very much to feel proud, truly proud. Those who have been registering their anger about the turns their lives have taken, and who place blame for their difficulty on government are calling out for help. Let's show them what will really give them pride. I have thought a lot about the times that unlikely partners have come together in one spirit. Think about 9/11 and the unity that followed. No one wants calamity to bring us together; we just want to be together. So, let's get creative; let's have the uncomfortable conversations that require us to listen very closely, imagining all the reasons our neighbors need us to love them. My friend's father still has a chance. My friend takes his chance regularly, loving him anyway ... How will we?

Water may wash us temporarily, but being bathed in the Spirit offers something far more enduring. God is still creating, and we can be part of what arises anew. This is not only a new year, or a new administration, or a new pastorate; we have a new day in which to love. May we live into this love fully, offering compassionate understanding even as we work for peaceful reconciliation. Amen.

Let us pray: Oh, God, be with us in the difficulty of these days. Strengthen us in mercy and compassion so that ours may be voices of light in a dark world. We pray in the name of the prince of peace, Jesus our Christ. Amen.