

**Risky Faith—1 John 3: 14-24**  
*(June 17, 2018-4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)*

As a young child one of my favourite activities were those numbered, connect-the-dots sheets. I loved the wonder of trying to figure out what the picture would look like as it gradually emerged. Our faith story from 1 John is a sermon to a community that isn't connecting the dots. It would seem obvious to say that the faithful life is one that is deeply involved in caring for others, yet John feels the need to deliver this very message: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?"<sup>1</sup> It seems that John's community has separated faith from action: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."<sup>2</sup> It seems that John's community is not connecting the dots.

It's something we all do from time to time. Sometimes it's because we get caught up in the busyness of our lives and the tyranny of doing. We don't stop to reflect or to listen to the ways in which Love might be calling us to live into our faith. But, sometimes there is a part of us that is afraid of this God we've come to know in Jesus—a part of us that is threatened by the full implications of faith. There is a part of us that wants to keep the divine at a distance, relegating God to the safety of word and speech as John says.

I'll tell you a story about this. It concerns the late American Baptist Pastor and social activist Will D. Campbell. Campbell was a no-nonsense, blunt talker who had his life endangered because of his activism on the race relations issue in the United States. One time Campbell was invited to Riverside Church in New York City to speak on the topic of how churches like Riverside could serve the cause of improving race relations. Riverside Church sits on the edge of Harlem, at the time an infamous ghetto of African American poverty. Riverside is a very well off congregation with a beautiful sanctuary of carved wood and stained glass. Campbell got up in the pulpit and started off by saying: "I know why you invited me here"—and there was a long pause as he surveyed the congregation—"You want to know how you can help relations between the races"—at this point he stopped, swept his eyes around the beautiful sanctuary, opened his arms and said—"You want to know how you can help relations between the races, and keep all of this." Ouch! He then proceeded to tell the gathered faithful that if they wanted to help relations between the races they should sell their property and use the money to set up scholarship funds for the kids of Harlem and trust funds for small business start-up.

John says this: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."<sup>3</sup> The essence of faith is risk, to risk in the name of love. If you go to the circus or an acrobatic show you don't want to watch a trapeze artist swing back and forth endlessly? The swinging back and forth is just preparation, a way of building energy. The breathtaking, heart-racing moment is the release—the

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3: 17

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3: 18

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3: 16

moment when there is risk and there is flying.<sup>4</sup> We know about that here at Parkminster having become an affirming church 11 years ago, prominently declaring our allyship with LGBTQ+ folks. It's come with some risks, as the graffiti of last fall reminds us. But love is the essence of the Christian life and Jesus' life teaches that the essence of love is surrender to God. To fully experience the fulfillment of God's promises requires surrender on our part, it requires risk, it requires us to connect the dots without knowing what the picture will look like. This is what faith is.

The grace or the gift of living this way comes in verse 24: "All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them." I might re-word it this way: All who surrender to God come to know that they live in God and God lives in them. Let me tell you another story. There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the heck is water?" "All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them." The most obvious, universal, ever-present realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about.<sup>5</sup> John says, all who surrender to God come to know that they live in God and God lives in them. The great gift of a Christian life that is fully embraced and lived is to realize that God is not some other-worldly being far removed from us. It is to know that there is no separation between us and God, that God is an ever-present, all-encompassing reality—the environment in which we live, breathe, move and have our being. We were conceived in God, we were born in God, and our lives are sustained by God. We are immersed in God's loving presence. A life of surrender and risk is to know the truth of the words attributed to Jesus; "the kingdom of God is among you."<sup>6</sup> "I am the light that is over all things. I am all: from me all has come forth, and to me all has reached. Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."<sup>7</sup>

To risk in the name of love is to connect the dots in the life of faith. What emerges is a picture of life as God sees it; a picture of all creation connected and sustained by the power of love. In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us, we are not alone. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

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<sup>4</sup> Rt. Rev. David Giuliano, *Uniting Ministries Newsletter*, May 2009, Issue 5.

<sup>5</sup> David Foster Wallace, "Plain old untrendy troubles and emotions", *The Guardian*, September 20, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/sep/20/fiction>

<sup>6</sup>Luke 17: 21

<sup>7</sup> Thomas 77: 1-3