

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Well, here we are. This 4th Sunday in Lent places us just past the halfway point on our journey to Resurrection on Easter Sunday morning. As we make this journey, we are called to a “newness of heart” that is represented in both of our Scriptures this morning from Joshua in the First Testament and 2 Corinthians in the Second.

We are making a journey. It’s a journey where we are called to embrace transformation, embrace new possibilities, and to embrace the new life that grows out of that. But we still have a ways to go before we arrive in the garden and find the empty tomb. With Easter beginning to appear over the horizon, we may be tempted to pick up the pace. But, if we listen to the Apostle Paul as he writes to the congregation in Corinth, we are reminded that we need to walk slowly and with great care. But that goes against our nature. However, we need to understand that there is some repair work that we need to do within our own hearts and in our world before we can get to and participate in the new creation that is brought about by Easter. So far, as we have travelled on this journey together, we have travelled through fruitful fields and realized that we are the masterpieces of God’s handiwork, we’ve been through the barren wilderness experiencing the promises of God, both large and small, and we have been fed at the table of grace. Like threads that sew together a patchwork quilt, this week we begin binding together this journey with repentance, reconciliation, and repair.

There is a particular concept that our Jewish brothers and sisters use to describe how they are called to respond to a world that feels like it's coming apart at the seams. It is a process that calls all humanity into action. *Tikkun Olam*, in the simplest of terms, means "to repair the world." When the fabric of society is torn, *Tikkun Olam* not only calls each of us to participate in mending what is broken, but to make it better than it was before it was damaged. And when it comes to the art of repairing the world, there are no shortcuts, no easy answers. It is the difficult and time-consuming work of repairing by way of reconciliation and restoration.

To repair systems and structures, we usually need to break them down to basic levels, see where the problem is, address the root causes of failure, and then begin rebuilding. It is not hard to look around this world, our own communities, perhaps even our own families, and see a thousand different fissures – cracks where God's harmonious creation has somehow gone awry. *Tikkun Olam* is not about grand gestures, but rather small acts of kindness, small steps made in faith, small displays of love and solidarity. Each daily action that embodies lovingkindness does not necessarily make an immediate, large impact. But as we keep loving and walking in grace, our collective actions, all together, can add up. They can begin to make a new world—a whole new creation!—if we only have eyes to see it.

How appropriate that today is UMCOR Sunday. You may remember it being referred to as One Great Hour of Sharing. This morning we took a special offering for UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief. UMCOR is at the very core of our mission and relief efforts here at home and around the world and it is truly one of the things that we get right as a denomination. As I mentioned when we collected the offering a few minutes ago, when disaster happens around the world, UMCOR is there in short order. The offering that we

collected this morning goes to underwrite the administrative expenses for UMCOR so that when you give to a specific disaster, 100% of the funds that are collected go to that disaster. Another part of UMCOR's mission is building new methods of sustainability for communities around the world. It is one of the ways that United Methodists are making a difference in the lives of people and communities around the world. For us in the United Methodist Church, UMCOR is the culmination of lots of individuals living the concept of *Tikkun Olam* in a concerted and co-ordinated way.

Paul urged the gathered community in Corinth to expand their vision, to see that "everything has become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). This kind of seeing moves beyond what our eyes can plainly see. Humanity has always tended to focus on what is broken, what is limiting, what is imperfect – both in ourselves and in the world. What if, on our way to building a new and better world, all the limits we put on people and things were suddenly dismantled? What if we started to see the world through the eyes of Christ, whose eyes saw human difference as an opportunity to expand the reign of God on earth?

Jesus saw through all barriers and boundaries, broke them to the point where even death lost all its finality. Jesus saw through all brokenness and hopelessness, and poured himself out to the point where love conquered all. What if part of our Lenten discipline involved learning to see with grace-healed eyes? What if we learned how to see with a newer, broader vision so that the widening of our vision led to a widening of our hearts? What if we focused on the threads of creation that bind us together and through the work of reconciliation began to stitch the threads of a new creation--threads that would bind us closer to one another and to God?

Our reading from Paul recalls a prophecy from Isaiah about the world made new: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (Isaiah 43:18-19). Paul continues this ancient theme, telling us the new creation is always and everywhere in our midst. It is always being created. And it is created by us through Christ. We are God’s vision. We are the ones that are resurrected with Christ. We are the ones who, while walking the wilderness way, have found Living Water in the desert. It is no longer enough to simply see and perceive that a new world is possible. Because we are to be the agents of reconciliation who keep working to bring God’s vision into reality. Paul proclaims, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” If any of us is in Christ, then there is a new creation! If we become a new creation, then how do we make this new creation into an observable reality?

The Lenten wilderness is a place where it becomes necessary to shed some of our old ways. We need to let go of sin and selfishness, greed and self-centeredness to make room for this whole new, resurrected life into which we are called to live. Paul asks his community—and us—to “be reconciled,” “trusting the ministry of reconciliation to us.”

Reconciliation involves letting go of our old ways of seeing. This Lenten journey that we are on can help us to see beyond the obstacles and stumbling blocks that prevent us from truly being reconciled to God and the rest of humanity. This Lenten journey can open our eyes to the places where the fabric of humanity seems too threadbare and torn. When we give up our resistance to the change that God calls of us in Christ, when we allow God in Christ to begin working in and through us, when we allow this new thing that is happening to us

take control, we begin to open the eyes of our hearts, to dream of a world fully reconciled and renewed, resurrected and restored.

Now, it is possible for us to resist seeing a new vision. We can resist a new way of living and being. We can be content to stay in our own grave-clothes. But the good news is that Christ keeps calling, beckoning, pulling at us, drawing us together so that all Creation might be reconciled to God. The good news is that when we see the frayed edges of human injustice and indignity with the eyes of Christ, then we are compelled to start the work of repair, the work of mending. The work of *Tikkun Olam*, making a difference, one small step and one small gesture at a time.

The world will never glimpse God's vision unless we share it, unless we make a concerted effort to say with our hearts and our lives: this is where the world has been torn asunder . . . this is where love is calling us to go . . . this is what love is calling us to bind and to build. Let us heal the hurt with the ties that bind it back together in Christ. Let us point to the places where water flows in the deserts of life. Let us work to live into the fullness of God's good creation. Let us see beauty while creating harmony, justice, and reconciliation – one small act at a time.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.