**Winnowing Love**

Epiphany 1, January 9, 2022

Acts 8: 14-17 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Superhero movies are very popular these days. The basic premise in these stories is pretty much always the same. A villain or bad person emerges and in the end the hero defeats him, which sometimes means killing them. The latest [Spiderman movie](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10872600/), No Way Home is [different.](https://sojo.net/articles/surprising-theology-spider-man-no-way-home) There are a number of villains from all the previous stories of Spiderman, all of whom have been created by some kind of lab accident or experiment gone wrong that gave them powers which they chose to use to be criminals or get revenge. This time, Peter Parker with his brilliance in science, sees a way he can save them and restore them to their previous self, before having to send them back to the universe where they came from, where their fate otherwise would be death. He is advised by his colleague, Dr. Strange against this because this is their fate and it is for the greater good. Peter, however sees the good in these villains and the greater good in saving them so they don’t have to die when they return. He challenges the status quo by seeing hope where no one else does.

John the Baptist proclaims a similar message about Jesus. He announces a radical reframing of people’s lives in calling them to repent, and create a more just and fair economy. He says earlier in the chapter we read from today: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none and whoever has food must do likewise.” So, they began to wonder if he was the Messiah, the one to come to save them from oppression, but he declared that while he baptizes them with water the one who is coming will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Then he talks about Jesus having a winnowing fork which he will use to gather the wheat into his granary and separate the wheat from the chaff. Now a winnowing fork is a tool used in harvest to throw the grain up in the air, to let the wind blow the chaff away, the unwanted covering of the seeds. It is often understood as a metaphor for separating the good from the bad people. However, Jesus sees the good in everyone, and like God named of Jesus, sees us as beloved. So, this metaphor is more about Jesus guiding people to be good, to love one another, and let go of, or discard, the bad, the unnecessary parts of ourselves that we don’t need or are not helpful for living a healthy, faithful life.

As Jesus came up out of the water, following his baptism, a voice was heard from heaven, “you are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” God named Jesus as beloved, and even though he hadn’t really done anything yet, his ministry hadn’t started, God is pleased and proud of Jesus. Just as he is, for who he is. I think it is safe to say that this is true with regard to God and ourselves as well. We are God’s beloved and God is pleased with and proud of us. Yes, we make mistakes and do things wrong, but we also know about God’s grace and forgiveness. Jesus guides us to live more fully and faithfully with that winnowing fork to guide us back to the way of love.

We continue to find ourselves wading through this pandemic. Here we are in the midst of a fifth wave. Many of us are so fed up with what feels like a continuing cycle of hope and despair. Things just start to feel like they are getting better, and then we are hit with another variant, that sets us back to where we were, stuck at home, worshipping online, nervous about going out, wondering if there will ever be a return to the familiar. Maybe there won’t be. What if this is our new normal? We will be back in person for worship again, I do believe, but it may not ever be like it was. However, we can carry on, and to winnow the thoughts, messages and attitudes that bring us down and continue in love to support one another. To continue to make the calls to support one another. To reach out to others when you need support. To care for those who are more vulnerable during these times. We are in this together and are not alone, and love and support will get us through it, as it has the last 21 months. May we be loved and recognize one another as beloved. It is what sustains us.

God sees Jesus and us as beloved. This week, one of Richard Rohr’s daily meditation was about receiving God’s loving gaze. Yesterday’s meditation was a practice by Christine Valters Paintner that encourages us to pass that loving gaze onto others. I share it with you here:

“How often do we really see another person as the beautiful gift they are? Perhaps this happens sometimes with those we love, where we are caught in a moment of grace and see them in all their wondrousness and feel full of gratitude for their presence in our lives.

Maybe you have a moment where your eyes meet, and you hold each other’s gaze for a few breaths as an act of seeing each other with love. . . .

We can intentionally bring this gaze of love to others. You can practice this with a beloved one or a very dear and close friend. You might try setting a timer for one minute and just sit together, eyes softly receiving each other while breathing together and praying quietly in your hearts.

Breathe in: *I see you with love*

Breathe out: *gifted, cherished.*

Breathe in: *Grateful*

Breathe out: *for who you are.*

This can be a very intimate and vulnerable moment because we so rarely spend this kind of time simply looking at another person with love and care.

We can also bring this practice out into the world. How often do we really see another person beneath their role, under our expectations? What if we paused at the grocery store and for a moment brought eyes of love to the stock clerk or the cashier. They don’t have to know what you’re doing. You don’t have to stare, just take in their image, then close your eyes for a moment, breathe, and bathe them with love. Pause and see the other person as beloved and beautiful as they indeed truly are.”

In the end, Spiderman with the help of his friends was able to restore all but one of the villains, the Green Goblin. Peter Parker found himself overcome with grief because the goblin had killed someone close to him, and now his pain was overtaking him to kill the Goblin in vengeance. However, his friends stop him, and he comes back to himself, and his commitment to the redemption and the greater good. His belief in the possibility of the good in the others, redeems them, and him, and becomes a new kind of hero.

May we see the good in all, even when it is hard to see, and work to bring the good, the love out in ourselves. May we be loving to others, open to be loved, and hold onto the knowledge that we are beloved, to support one another and sustain us through these days.