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The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori
Presiding Bishop and Primate
The Episcopal Church

People and nations around the world mark the restoration of relationships in a variety of ways. Some people celebrated Valentine's Day on the 14th of this month as a sign of love shared between two people. Nations sign treaties, both to signal an end to wars and as a mutual understanding about how they will live together in the future. The rainbow set in the sky after the great flood is God's sign of restored relationship and the expectation that that kind of global destruction will never happen again – at least not by God's action. When human beings have a heated argument, or families have a big fight, sometimes those relationships take a very long time to be restored. When the conflict finally ends, the depth of pain usually requires some external sign and recognition of healing – at least a handshake or an embrace.

This season called Lent is an opportunity to work on healing and restoring relationships of all sorts. Lent began as a time of solidarity with those who were preparing for baptism at Easter. It marks the beginning of a special relationship with new members of the body of Christ. When they are baptized, the community promises to stay in relationship. Those ancient Lenten exercises of prayer, study, fasting, and alms-giving are ways of reminding and training ourselves to be better stewards of our relationships with each other and with God.

All kinds of relationships are meant to be grounded in the kind of love God has for us, and we have a powerful vision in the story of Jesus' baptism. When he comes up out of the water, the voice from heaven proclaims, "you are my beloved, and in you I am well pleased." This happens before Jesus has even begun his ministry, before anybody around him has recognized who he is or what he is about, and before he has done a single memorable thing. It is an echo of the first creation story in Genesis, when God creates light and waters, sun and moon, plants and planets, the birds of the air, fish of the sea, and animals of the land, and finally the human species. At each stage in creation, God pronounces it good. Human beings are blessed and called very good. A second creation story follows, as Adam and Eve are created in God's image and begin to exercise their ability to choose, whether for good or ill.

Jesus' baptism echoes both creation stories. He hears the voice of God calling him beloved, blessed, very good, and then he goes out into the wilderness to meet the tempter, like Adam and Eve in the garden. Our own baptism is meant to remind us of this as well. God says to each one, "you are my beloved; in you I am well pleased." It does not depend on what we do or don't do. Most of us find that pretty hard to believe, yet it is the foundation of all right relationship. We cannot really love God unless we know that God loves us, and we certainly cannot love our neighbors as ourselves until we know ourselves beloved.

Lent is an opportunity to begin to renew that reality in our own hearts and in the ways we put our hearts to work in the world around us. I would invite you to start these days of Lent by

hearing God say to you, “you are my beloved – in you I am well pleased.” Take a few quiet moments each morning to remember the depth of that love. And then choose some conscious ways in which to share your knowledge of being beloved with the world around you.

Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness are an encounter with his own ability to choose loving ways or destructive ones. The temptation is to exclude the creative possibility of greater love, to reject the invitation to more abundant life. Jesus’ time in the wilderness is about wrestling with those choices – and he finds a strengthened relationship with God. Then he returns to Galilee to tell others about the creative possibility of choosing love. Remember what he says? “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe this good news.”

The time IS fulfilled and the kingdom HAS come near – we don’t have to wait until after we die for good news – it is here all around us, if we will only notice. The kingdom of God is right here, within us, between us, in healed relationships, in people recognizing that they are loved as creatures of God and acting as though their neighbors were also God’s beloved.

The time is now, the kingdom is here, repent and believe. We often misunderstand that word “repent.” It means turn around and move toward that loving and healing relationship with God. It means “choose life.” It does not fundamentally mean to be sorry for what is past. Repentance is about turning around and facing in God’s direction, it is about choosing ways of love and welcome rather than rejection. Believing the good news of God’s love means letting our own hearts be changed into instruments that meet the world with the same kind of love.

When we were in Korea last week, one of our hosts told me that the word for peace, *pyung wha*, means rice that is evenly shared. The characters for that word are the same in Chinese. When we say *peng on* that’s fundamentally what we’re talking about. Peace is what love looks like in the world, when relationships are healed and holy. It has everything to do with ending hunger and poverty, for a hungry person is often an angry person. When the basic needs of human beings are answered, there is far greater possibility for true peace. The prophets of the Bible made this point repeatedly – a healed and peaceful world means that people have food, and enough left over for feasting, they have adequate shelter and clothing, just employment rather than slavery, and they live in peace because there is justice. When there is sufficiency, there is no need to answer your needs by taking from someone else. Jesus’ own ministry repeatedly modeled that prophetic vision – he fed people abundantly, he healed disease profligately, and he challenged oppression, both political and religious.

What does love look like in today’s world? It certainly means answering hunger, whether in North Korea or Somalia. It means immigration policies and social structures that permit freer movement in the cause of justice – to find employment or reunite families. The xenophobia in many countries around the world is really the opposite of love. Being deeply intolerant and afraid of strangers means we have chosen to see foreigners as something other than beloved creatures of God – it is a fundamentally unloving response to say that this person is illegal, illegitimate, or not fit to live in my community.

How do we choose loving relationships? Those old disciplines of Lent are a good starting place. Shape your prayer to promote healing in all relationships, both very personal ones

and in the larger society. Study and reflect on the biblical vision of a healed world, and on the ministry of Jesus – what can we learn from his own loving choices? Fast from self-centered satisfaction, and give alms in abundance so that our loves begin to turn outward. This season is simply a practice of turning away from primary focus on ourselves and toward the life-giving possibility of more loving relationships with God and neighbor.

Pray that we might live in ways that build a world of *pyung wha*, rice shared evenly. That is the coming of the kingdom, for it expresses what God intends for all creation: healed and holy relationships of loving justice. May your Lent bring fruit like that – and rice in abundance! *Peng on* – peace be with you!