

# BEYOND THE DOOR



Alice Fleming Townley  
July 26, 2020  
Colossians 3:12-17

<sup>12</sup> As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord<sup>[a]</sup> has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup> Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. <sup>15</sup> And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ<sup>[b]</sup> dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:12-17)

Our opening hymn was one of my favorites:

*Here in this place new light is streaming . . .  
See in this space our fears and our dreamings . . .  
Gather us in, the lost and forsaken . . .  
Call to us now and we shall awaken<sup>i</sup>*

We have often sung these words near Rally Day as a homecoming. We have gazed at the light in the cross, and our voices and faces have filled this space with joy. It is much quieter today. As Jesus said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I longed to gather you in as a Mother hen her chicks." Jesus was always gathering and nourishing—some unassuming fishermen, a woman alone at the well, an unexpected guest at the table.

"Jesus not only gathered, but also scattered." As Rev. Emily Scott wrote this week. "Early in the Gospels Jesus sent new recruits out to heal and cast out demons. They did not have much in the way of supplies. And sometimes they went not in pairs but alone." And we remember other stories. Jacob was alone in the middle of nowhere, when he had a dream, and he realized as he awoke, 'Surely, the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.' And then there was a traveler robbed, beaten and left by the side of the road who was taken in by a Samaritan of all people. And a court official, led by an Ethiopian Queen, who was baptized by the side of the road. And the two followers of Jesus who were walking on

the Road to Emmaus, who finally recognized the stranger at home in the breaking of the bread. And Saul who saw the light and heard God voice on the road to Damascus. In the Bible places of desolation and isolation are also places of encounter. <sup>ii</sup>

We are used to our rituals and our routines and being in this place—but this pandemic has placed us beyond these walls. We are scattered. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us,

*Church is not a stopping place but a starting place for discerning God's presence in this world . . . When [people] leave church, they no more leave God than God leaves them. They simply carry what they have learned into the wide, wide world where there is a crying need for people who will recognize the holiness in things and hold them up to God.*<sup>iii</sup>

Had you asked me fresh out of seminary or after passing my ordination exams, or even a few months ago, about whether we could share in Holy Communion while worshipping online—I would have squinted. I may also have given theological reasons and made Biblical references about how things should be. And then . . . suddenly we are living and learning and worshipping beyond our imaginations. And Presbytery declared, these are extra ordinary circumstances, we need to adapt. And members of our congregation said, “We hunger for communion.” Worship and Music Committee and Session said, “yes, it’s time.” And my heart and mind expanded. As we shared the meal together last month, and prepare to do so again today, I am moved by God’s sacramental presence in the church and in the world.

The hymn continues:

*Give us to drink the wine of compassion  
Give us to eat the bread that is you  
Nourish us well and teach us to fashion  
Lives that are holy and hearts that are true  
Not in the dark of buildings confining . . .*<sup>iv</sup>

And we remember how Jesus took the bread from the table where he and the disciples had been eating together. He did not take a rare holiday item, but bread, as they would eat daily in their homes. And he said, “This is my body, broken for you. Take, eat, and when you do remember me.” Jesus gave his very self to feed us. And in receiving, we become bread to nourish others. We receive Jesus’ love, that we might become love. We receive Jesus’ peace, that we become peace. We receive forgiveness, that we might forgive. We receive resurrection, that in our dying, we might rise.

This last week, we have mourned the loss of Congressman John Lewis. A few years ago, his biography *March* was our community book read and many of us from church went to hear him speak in East Lansing. As he reflected on the Civil Rights movement he said, “When we went on the freedom ride, it was love in action. The march from Selma to Montgomery was love in action. We did it not simply because it was the right thing to do, but it was love in action. We knew to love . . . we had to move our feet.”

As a college student, John Lewis met with others under the leadership of a young seminarian, James Larson, at a United Methodist Church every Sunday evening. They talked about God’s kingdom and what it would look like and how to live the kingdom on earth now. They studied Jesus and Ghandi and role-played scenarios. They practiced loving everyone, even their enemies. Loving in a way that would give insight and understanding. Going to and finding people to live love with that might not be getting such a message otherwise. Loving people in a way that empowered them to rise and live fully. They knew that being God’s love incarnate in a broken world would be costly and that they would be called names, and possibly beaten and maybe even killed. Nevertheless, they practiced loving the world in a way that would save.<sup>v</sup>

And the hymn,

*Not in the dark of buildings confining  
Not in some heaven light years away  
But here in this place the new light is shining  
Now is the kingdom, now is the day  
Gather us in and hold us forever . . .  
Gather us in and make us your own . . .  
Fire of love in our flesh and our bones*

*Fire of love in our flesh and our bones<sup>vi</sup>*

For the last 6 weeks, we have drawn from *Open the Door* by Joyce Rupp. We have reflected on the doors of our hearts, knocking on the door, opening the door, standing on the threshold, closing the door, and now, going beyond the door. Indeed, we are gathered in, and sent out, time and time again. Jesus offers us the bread and the cup for this journey that we might be filled with the *fire of love in our flesh and our bones* wherever we may be.

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<sup>i</sup> 401, Marty Haugen, “Here in This Place,” *Glory To God Hymnal*, 2013, John Knox Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Emily M.D. Scott, “Start Looking, and You’ll See Roads All Over the Bible,” July 19, 2020, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/19/opinion/start-looking-and-youll-see-roads-all-over-the-bible.html>

<sup>iii</sup> 145, in *Open the Door* by Joyce Rupp copyright © 2008. Used with the permission of the publisher, Sorin Books®, an imprint of Ave Maria Press®, Inc., Notre Dame, Indiana 46556. [www.avemariapress.com](http://www.avemariapress.com).

<sup>iv</sup> 401, Marty Haugen, “Here in This Place,” *Glory To God Hymnal*, 2013, John Knox Press.

<sup>v</sup> John Lewis, “Love in Action,” January 26, 2017, *OnBeing with Krista Tippett*, <http://onbeing.org/programs/john-lewis-love-action/>

<sup>vi</sup> 401, Marty Haugen, “Here in This Place,” *Glory To God Hymnal*, 2013, John Knox Press.