My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Eastertide Bodies, Hearts, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

Last week we talked about human scapegoats. And in the context of a 15 minute sermon and tying it to what’s going on in the world, there’s not enough time to fully wrap up what we witness on the news much less how we think about it. So on this communion Sunday, where our scripture talks so eloquently about love, let’s wrap up a few loose ends.

Relating to others is a messy, complicated thing. It's frustrating and challenging to try to show love, particularly towards folks whom we don’t understand. And that's precisely why God's incredible love for us calls us to enter into the messy, complex world of flawed people and live as witnesses to God's love for each and every one of us, and this is where we have to call on all the resources we have as Christians to resist cycles of violence, and yes, cycles of scapegoating and blame.

Any human being can be plausibly scapegoated and no human can prevail when the collective community turns against them. But I’m not sure it’s sufficient to simply instruct us about our situation. For we are all too fully enclosed in the scapegoating process to be able to break the spell. We just want to blame someone else for our troubles. It’s a *miracle* to become aware of our own actions of blame and recriminations as scapegoating.

Jesus does not volunteer to get into God’s justice machine. God volunteers to get into ours. Jesus’ persecutors intend his death to bring peace, to avoid an outbreak of violence between Romans and Israelites, between Jews and other Jews. Jesus’ accusers intend his death to be sacrificial business as usual. But God means for it to be the opposite. And here’s the miracle.

When we locate ourselves by reference to Jesus, it is hard not to see our location to our victims. It is not enough to simply recognize the existence of the sacrificial dynamic. We need to see its application in our own situation. We need a substitute, a way to overcome conflict in our communities without resort to sacrifice.

This is actually the great venture the Church is engaged in every time it gathers at the communion table. When Christians come there, we meet the unequivocal reminder of Christ’s bloody death, of the blindness and abandonment of the disciples. And when we hear “Do ***this*** in remembrance of me,” we hear the implied contrast. Do ***this*** instead of offering new victims. Unlike the mythic figures who hid past actual bodies and modeled future sacrifices, Christ is not to be remembered with scapegoating, with taking or being new victims. “***This***” is a humble meal and prayer, not a new cross.

Following that example, Christians undertake the hope that this meal of the new community may accomplish the peace that sacrificial violence could, and more. In it, we recall a real sacrifice and practice a substitutionary atonement. On our table, bread and wine are to be continually substituted for victims, substituted for any, and all, of us. We still need better policy solutions for our police and prison systems. But we need to start with the love we are called to show, do, and pursue, especially with folks we don’t understand.

OK? Does that help? This is not easy stuff because it’s so counter-intuitive to our instincts. God’s love demands that we remember that God created everything and everyone in love first, forgave us first, and then tells us to follow that example. Love what I love, says God. Creation. People, neighbors. And be thankful and grateful for those things, for what is before you right here, right now, for this moment, this time. Buddhists call this mindfulness. Christians call it centering prayer.

Our Gospel of John reading today recognizes it as connectedness, in talking about the vine and branches. God is well aware that we cannot exist without the eternal, the one who came before us and will be here after us, the Alpha and Omega. But God also sees that even though we draw all our strength for our efforts from the mother vine which is God, the fruit is borne on the branches of the vine. God is glorified and served only through each and all of us, constantly reminding us of the relationship that exists, what Martin Buber calls the “I-Thou”. And God calls us to be healthy brances doing God’s will, not an old, gnarled, thick, entangled stem. Those branches are perfectly healthy, but not fruitful.

There might be some mildew and diseased leaves, and deadwood amongst the branches and sparse foliage. Our God, however, never gives up. The vine is always trying to give us nurture and direction. So God says as we bear fruit as disciples, we can’t just stop there. We have to continue to reinvent ourselves, to prune our old efforts and start new ones to continue to be the Church in the world. A church of witness. A church of love. A church that constantly seeks engagement in, and with, the world that God created and loves.

Lots of folks have ideas on what a church should be and look like these days. Spiritual re-birth, or clearing out our dead-wood post-pandemic is tough stuff. Here are CCCG we wonder what we’re going to look like—a year older, a few of us no longer here. But before we get all too excited about what our future holds, John’s letter reminds us that we have to start with the basics of what Christ was all about and why he came to be with us. God wants us to be spiritually mature in this new grapevine iteration of CCCG. What’s the test of that maturity? It’s right here. God is love, and we should love on another. This is the mark, John says, of authentic discipleship and service. Through love we confirm that God lives in us and this God’s love is completed in our lives.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts. Can our church be the place where folks put their hearts and trust they can be broken open? Remember the three things folks fear most—fear of failure, fear of losing control, and fear of being un-loved. Well, for my 2 cents, once I figured out that I was loved by God, failure and control weren’t all that scary.

God just wants to give our all, no guarantees of what we think of success. But in God’s kingdom, giving all in love means we did it. All that was asked. We witnessed to the oppressed. We stood in solidarity with the prisoner. We helped provide for the needy. We comforted the widow. We gave in love to our neighbor, without any expectation of return. Genuine love can’t be exhibited unless it reflects God’s love, unless it’s rooted in an experience of being loved. Love is God’s essence, and it should be ours this day and every day, and for that reality, thanks be to God, Amen.