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My husband Randy and I have just returned from a pilgrimage to my hometown, Red Wing, Minnesota, where we soaked up all the beauty of autumn—the leaf color, the crisp days, the freshly picked apples from the local orchards, the cranberry festival, the local art festival—all of it. We saw my old house, my school, my church. All the churches, actually, because the little town of Red Wing has clustered a full collection of churches around the central green of the town. From that green, you can see the Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, and five Lutheran churches. The Catholic Church is a couple blocks away.

Just about everything looks pretty much as it did when I was a child, but I got one surprise. At my church I saw a flyer for a workshop entitled “Recipe for Loving Our Neighbor: Open Faces, Open Hearts, Open Arms.”

I thought well that sounds good--Open Faces, Open Hearts, Open Arms--but that is not the church I remember!

I grew up in the 1950s-60s in a Minnesota Norwegian Lutheran family. This is not a culture that you might describe as open.

We were taught not to have open faces out in public, but to guard our expressions, not to get too carried away you know. I wasn't ever very good at hiding my emotions. I had no poker face. This was blamed on the fact that I was one-quarter Swede. (My dad was half Norwegian and half Swedish—he was outspoken and exuberant.)

We were taught not to have open hearts—well, open to Jesus—but keep an eye on those others, especially those that might not be Lutheran, or at least Protestant. Be careful. Guard your heart.

And we were taught not to have open arms. Actually, we didn't really need to be taught; it came part and parcel with our DNA. We kept our arms folded, thank you. Hugging was for Californians.

I grew up with all those lessons, most of them unspoken. But I also grew up hearing the constant drumbeat from Jesus: “Love God, Love your neighbor as yourself.” I've come to know that is the heart of the Jesus story—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John make no bones about it. And it is the heart of the Hebrew scriptures. Matthew wants his community to see in this verbal tussle with the religious authorities that Jesus always echoes the ancient law of the Torah. “Love God, Love your neighbor as yourself.”

So as I walked down 5th Street from First Lutheran past United Lutheran, around the corner to St. Paul's Lutheran, I wondered: is that the drumbeat of my life now? Can I—can we—make that the drumbeat of our lives, not just in our words in church but everywhere, all the time—even when I might not feel loving or expansive? Even in the current climate of divisiveness and distrust that engulfs our country?

As I walked the familiar sidewalks of my town, I remembered another lesson I learned in my Lutheran childhood, something that tempers and liberates all that northern emotional reserve, something that still holds up. I learned about two things: thanks and giving. Thanksgiving.

I was taught, at home and at church, that any gifts I had, any material goods, any talents, anything I might claim as my own, was a gift from God. And so, I was 1) to give thanks, and 2) to give back. We all gave our best back to God, which of course meant giving back to the church. Back then, in the 1950s and early 60s, in my little town, in my little frame of reference, we never questioned where we might find God; God was of course inside the church. And we could count on the church to see to it that our giving

didn't stop with the church, because the church gave to the community, to the world outside our lovely stone building. We knew our dimes in our Sunday School Lenten Dime Folders and our dollars in the weekly plate went far away to exotic places like Africa and Arizona.

I learned that the church was the place that kept us all connected to the world outside our little Minnesota river town. And it wasn't about any feeling, it wasn't about emotions; it was simply about the regular habit, the discipline if you will, the spiritual practice of giving thanks to God, and giving back to do God's work in the world—giving with talent and time and treasure.

I didn't think of that back then as opening my face or my heart or my arms, and I didn't think of it really as having anything to do with love. It was just habit.

As I walked past the Post Office, where my grandfather worked, past the County Courthouse and the war memorial bearing names from the Civil War through two World Wars, Vietnam, the Middle East, I thought about the ways those early lessons might have something to do with the Minnesota culture of welcoming immigrants and refugees—the church and civic culture of hospitality that began with World War II refugees, then Southeast Asians, then Somalis, and the recent powerful protests against the ICE surge in Minneapolis.

I passed my dentist Dr. Strandemo's office, and crossed the street to the Episcopal Church with its bright red door. A big sign out front declared: Love God. Love your Neighbor. Change the World.

YES! I felt I had come full circle from the church of my childhood to the church of today. That sign struck a chord—that was the church I discovered in my late 20s in Pasadena, California.

All Saints Pasadena taught me that loving God wasn't really about a feeling, but it was about movement. It was about turning outward, opening out to the world, to active and sometimes risky engagement with the big issues of the day: poverty, racism, discrimination of all kinds, endless wars, anything that hurt the most vulnerable in our society. I saw the church and its brave clergy willing to engage the world and its challenges. I saw the echo of my childhood learning about the church and our giving connected us to the world.

At All Saints Pasadena I learned that the work of the church included the world of politics. After all, politics is about public life, about the way that we make choices about things that matter to people like clean water, clear air, good schools, affordable health care, thriving communities.

I learned in those years at All Saints the core lesson of the Hebrew prophets, the lesson of Jesus: we judge a society by the condition of its most vulnerable members. I learned that charity was critical for immediate need, but love pushed us on to do justice, to get at the reason charity was necessary in the first place. I learned that charity was often safe to do, but justice work got you in trouble, because it meant asking questions about things like budgets and priorities and power and who benefits and who gets hurt.

I believe it's the work of the church to ask those questions. I believe that's how we love God, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

I am grateful for the brave clergy and all the brave people at Trinity who ask those questions. This is a place where we push at the edges, where we go beyond comfort in areas of theology and politics and human relations, all the places we live our daily lives. This is a place of open honest faces, open welcoming hearts, open willing arms.

It's not easy—not here and not in Minnesota. We often flail and fail. We get tired and numb and complacent. Sometimes we get it wrong. Sometimes the need and the problems are just overwhelming. Sometimes we find ourselves disagreeing on just how

to be God's people doing God's work in the world. But best we can, we discern together how best to practice God's love in our day, how to hear that call of Jesus to love our neighbor. It is a practice, a daily practice just like anything else in life. It's not about getting it exactly right. It is about hanging in.

So I try to keep learning, grateful that the church has been a good teacher from that first Lutheran Lenten Dime Folder to today's gospel call to love my neighbor, the drumbeat call of Jesus to keep our eyes open, our hands ready. I am grateful to be learning in your good company. I try to keep open, to keep honest with myself about whether or not I'm getting too comfortable, whether or not God is asking me to change, to try something unfamiliar, to open my heart, to look and see how I am doing with my practice.

One thing I know, God seems to keep on giving, so how can I do anything but keep on giving back, saying thanks? It's the only way I know to love. It's the only way I know how to change the world.

AMEN.