Easter 6, Year B

Uh-oh, says the woman in the aisle seat of our row; what’s uh-oh? I ask. There’s a screaming baby somewhere in the back of this plane. You were once a screaming baby, I say with a smile. No I was not! she answers rather fiercely; discipline, that’s what they need. These parents that let their kids get away with murder.

That was the three-hour flight from Houston to Philadelphia. I was not aware of the screaming baby.

From Philadelphia to Burlington, in the smaller plane that was no more or less cramped, just accommodated fewer people, I was the aisle seat and there was a baby one seat up, across the aisle. She was perfectly behaved: smiled, took her bottle, burped, smiled, then her pacifier, spit it out, played hide-and-seek with Mom and the bib, smiled, squirmed, had it in her mind that she was going to run up and down the length of the aisle even though I’m pretty sure she wasn’t walking yet, smiled….. I could tell things were moving out of the realm of perfect baby. All the while, Mom held her, hugged her, spoke softly, rocked her, kissed her, straightened her hair, created new games to hold her interest.

And then, there they were: tears rolling down my cheeks. Having just seen my two older sisters and younger brother with their spouses, all of us now in our 70s, some of us with physical challenges; my newly married niece, preparing to lecture in Berlin, then Princeton, then University of Toronto; my nephew with his beautiful and sophisticated girlfriend of several years. My thoughts circulated around what would I give to be able to hold one of those babies in my arms, hug, comfort, rock, straighten hair, whisper away the discomforts and anxieties of the world. Why do we tell them everything will be alright when we know better. **Will** everything be alright?

John says it will: If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my father’s commandments and abide in his love. The Way of Love.

So what do we do with the people we don’t really like? There are some folks we instinctively steer clear of, let’s be honest. Whether they’re people who look different, dress inappropriately, speak about things that shouldn’t be spoken of in public. I recall my mother saying things like I really don’t think you should spend time with her, she’s not a good influence; or sometimes my little red lights start flashing, telling me that person is up to no good, wants something from me that is less than honorable. We need to be vigilant, of course. But when our instincts tell us to beware, let’s take just a second or two and imagine that less than desirable person a baby in our arms, a little person who is desperately in need of love and comforting; let’s take the two or three seconds out of our comfort bubble and hold that person in our heart. “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were once aliens in Egypt,” we hear in Exodus. Acts tells us today that the Holy Spirit fell upon **all** who heard! The circumcised that had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out **even** on the Gentiles, even upon those resident aliens. With God’s grace, rather than hostility, love can be our default reaction when we encounter folks we don’t know, with whom we wouldn’t ordinarily associate. Certainly, loving the stranger affects our lives positively, and I believe it can make a difference in their lives, that it is never too late to pray love on someone who may have had a lousy life and takes it out on everyone else. We just don’t know what burden that person is carrying or has been carrying over a lifetime. Of course, we can make it easy on ourselves and say, well, I had a rough childhood myself and that doesn’t give me permission to make everyone else’s life as miserable as mine. Or we can go the Way of Love, as our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry has been saying for the last seven years. When he preached at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, Bishop Curry emphasized the redemptive power of love: “never underestimate the power of love; love has the power to change the world!” Love has the power to redeem us from the bad things we have done to others as a result of difficult, even horrendous circumstances in our lives.

So the Good News this morning is that if you have access to a baby, don’t – for the sake of God and Creation – when asked if you want to hold the baby, say oh, no, I’m afraid I might drop her: but rather find a comfortable chair, maybe the Lay-Z-Boy you were sitting in two weeks ago, get settled, take the babe in your arms, look right into her eyes. Speak to him, rock her, kiss him, brush her cheek with the side of your hand, call him by his name, tell them everything’s going to be okay. Sing a verse of Fairest Lord Jesus to that holy innocent. And know that **this** is the Love of God, this is the peace beyond all understanding that God wants for you, for me, for each one of us. And **this** is the love Jesus has commanded us to have for one another.