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## Of Mermaids and Bridges of Transformation

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

In 1989 audiences around the country were smitten with a teenage mermaid who longed to transcend the overprotected comfort of her life as a princess under the sea to being able to walk and run and love in the world of land and trees and all the stuff of humanity. Walt Disney's retelling of Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Mermaid* certainly captured the hearts of children, teenagers, and parents; in part because of its fantastic musical score and songs, its modern relevant characters, and the ending, which was a big change from the Anderson original.

In Hans Christian Anderson's version of the story, the little mermaid, who was never named, longed not only to leave the world of the sea to be among humans, but because she wanted an immortal soul, so she could be part of something larger than herself and her life of ease and comfort under the sea. The only way she could attain a soul was to drink a magic potion that turned her fish tail into legs, but since these legs were not natural, every step she took on them would cause her to suffer extreme pain. As a human, she had to get a man to fall in love with her, or she'd die and without a soul become nothing but sea foam. Believing the world of humans that she had seen from the water to be beautiful and kind, she paid a sea witch the price of her voice to get those legs. But once on shore she discovered the world was more complex than what she had viewed from afar. It was a world of greed, politics, classism, and one where the love she offered a prince was rejected. Because she had loved selflessly, she earned the opportunity to serve as a sort of spirit doing good deeds for 300 years in hopes of gaining a soul. As those of you familiar with the story know, that's the end of the original story of the little mermaid.

In the Disney version, the little mermaid, who they gave the dignity of giving her the name Ariel, was able to transcend her life under the sea due not the spell of a witch, but the love of a parent, her father who gave her the freedom to love the prince she loved and who in this version loved her. All this love made the divide between two worlds less wide, and in some ways brought the two worlds closer together.

It's easy to see why the Disney version of *the Little Mermaid* was embraced by audiences of all ages, for there is something in us that is drawn to the idea that two worlds can come closer together, and that love is the bridge that can work such a transcendent miracle.

The divide between worlds is one of the concepts Jesus addressed in the section from John's Gospel we just heard this morning. In this part of John's Gospel Jesus is still in the midst of his "farewell discourse" his very long speech before the events of his arrest, trial, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. The part of the speech we just heard is part of a long prayer Jesus prayed on behalf of his disciples, those who followed him, whom he loved. It's important to remember this Gospel was written down many years after the events themselves actually took place, so these words are not necessarily a word for word account of what Jesus actually said. The author of John's Gospel is using these words to help us who follow Jesus long after these events took place understand what it means to follow Jesus.

It's important to note that Jesus prayed for his followers, like a loving parent. Anchoress, mystic and theologian Julian of Norwich wrote that Jesus is like a mother, and whether or not we are bold enough to reflect on her theology, it is possible to see a parental sort of love in Jesus' desire to both send his followers into the world to continue his work and to have the love and protection he gave them continued. Not unlike Ariel's father whose love allowed his daughter to walk on the earth so she could love. This love of Jesus, who is the embodiment of God's love for humanity, is the love that transcends that which divides the worlds Jesus mentioned in today's Gospel.

It can be hard to follow this bit from John's Gospel, where the author mentions the world as where the disciples came from, and is where they must go, but is also a sort of threat, for neither Jesus nor the disciples belong to the world, they belong to God, that is why Jesus prays for their protection. This can be confusing. It might give us cause to wonder whether the world is good or bad and recall another place in John's Gospel where the author wrote God loved the world. Which world is it God loves?

To work through such wonderings, we need to remember that the word "world" has multiple meanings in the Bible. In Genesis, world or cosmos, is everything God created and pronounced good: the land, the seas and lakes and rivers, the grasses and flowers and trees, the animals and birds and fish, the stars and planets, human beings, everything we can see and touch and smell including some things that are too small or too far away to experience. That is the world. And like a mermaid gazing at it from a fixed perspective, it often does look beautiful, fantastic, amazing, and inviting.

In John's Gospel, the world also means that which has intentionally chosen to openly oppose God. This isn't just human sinfulness or rebelliousness, it is the intentional opposition to God and God's will. It is seeing God as dead, or antiquated or irrelevant or foolish and the arrogant insistence that we have the ability to sort out a much better existence than what God planned. This opposition to God is marked by things like greed, exploitation, corruption, segregation, dehumanization, anything that stands against the love of God. When the author of John's Gospel wrote about the world rejecting Jesus, this is what he or she meant. It is also what some people call evil.

There is still one more definition of the world in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. It is the place where God's will and God's work of transformation happens. It is the mission field of the Church, it is where our Presiding Bishop reminds us as followers of Jesus where we are called to go so we can see God's Presence, and serve as best we can as bridges of love that help shrink the gap between the world God made where God walked with humanity in the cool of the evening and the world opposed to God. So this isn't a situation that is a dichotomy of either or, as much as it is living with all definitions being true at the same time. The little mermaid was right, the world is deeply complex.

While it might sound impossible to live in such complexity as bridges of God's love, remember nothing is impossible with God, and it is happening right here at Church of the Good Shepherd. Not only in the ministries we are doing, but the way we go about our ministries, with the intention of showing God's love as we serve lunch, give prayer shawls, share the sacred peace of our chapel where we let people from all walks of life find rest, and in our newly forming ministries where we aim to create a third good place for people to rest, or work, or have conversations, or maybe encounter a church person that contradicts the negative stereotype that is so pervasive in modern culture, which is one of our goals in our café or coffee shop ministry we are calling CrossRoads.

As we continue to engage in these bridge building ministries, we sometimes do encounter the world the author of John's Gospel referred to, and the little mermaid encountered once she got on land: those who try to bully or take advantage or destroy: the greedy or corrupt. And these encounters can be discouraging and like the little mermaid we might find they cause our hearts to break. But we also encounter the curious, the open hearted, the appreciative, and those who let us see how even a small conversation we are brave enough to engage in can be a vehicle of

transformation and we remember we aren't alone in this world: the world God created out of joyful love, the world that turned against God, and the world we inhabit where we can see it all at once, because God is here, still at work with us and through us.

This past Thursday the Church calendar commemorated the Ascension of Jesus. Ascension is about Jesus being assumed into another world, the world of God's love often called heaven. In this case, heaven is less a place we go after we die as much as it is the realm of God's love and power. And while it might make sense to see it as completely separate from the world we inhabit, next Sunday we will see that it is not as separate as we might imagine when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit.

According to the church calendar, today we are inhabiting the last Sunday in the Season of Easter, telling us the 50-day celebration of Jesus' resurrection is nearly over. It reminds us of the time between Jesus' ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the value in living in time that is between one event and another. It is also a day on the world's calendar that celebrates motherhood, but so many people I know feel pain and sadness today as they mourn the mothers they have lost or feel they never knew, or had mothers who hurt, abused, exploited or took advantage of them. There are women who feel pain because they cannot have children and women who feel guilt for loving and raising children who are not their own. There are women who resent the commercialization and corruption of the day. And then there are those for whom this is a happy day, a day they happily honor their loving mother and the mothering people in their lives. So, in a way, this day also represents the complexity of worlds Jesus talked about in the Gospel.

One way we might consider moving through all that complexity to reflect on Julian of Norwich's theology that Jesus is our mother. Instead of comparing Jesus to our mothers or our mothers to Jesus, which is not the point, we can reflect on the kind of love Jesus showed. One where he prayed for his followers, just as Jesus prays for us who follow him today – for you and for me- for us. Not to stay out of the complex world, but to enter into it with his love as our gift to the world and as our protection. Jesus wasn't the parent to keep his disciples in their safe places, but sends us as Ariel's father sent her, into the world not to conquer it, or shame or exploit it, or punish it, but to love it, as God loves. For that is the only thing powerful enough to transform and transcend divisions. And for such love, we can forever shout alleluia.