



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"Love Revealed" - The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost - 10/25/2020

I speak to you as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

I am not usually a fan of long distance relationships, except when it comes to my parents. My parents and I, for many years, had a long distance relationship. I left home basically at 16 when I found a way to kind of find a pursuit over the summer. And I was in boarding school and I never quite returned home, except for one summer after my first year at university. And from that point on, I was on my own. And that was a good thing. We saw the world differently. We were kind of on different wavelengths. We pursue different interests. We didn't have a whole lot in common.

And though I am incredibly grateful for them, for all the things that they did for me, they gave me every opportunity in life, that long distance relationship was something I came to treasure. Until a few years ago when it became clear that my parents needed help as they were getting older, and they moved close to here where I could care for them. And these past two and a half years have been an incredible blessing to me. I did not expect that I would have this opportunity to get to know them in the way I have, and it's been a time of reconciliation. It's been a time of better understanding each other, of communication.

I've walked with my mom through many chapters in our own health history, and gotten to know her a little bit better. And she's gotten to know me a little bit better. My father unfortunately, has suffered from dementia since my parents moved. I've learned a whole lot about my father from my mother. These are things that have been hard for me to hear, and he has not been able to explain it or defend himself because of his dementia. In fact, the dementia is getting worse and worse and so communication has become more and more difficult as he has declined.

My father has been in hospice since November last year. This past year has been exceedingly difficult. There have been moments regularly where it was expected that he would die only for him to bounce back. A few years ago, I was visiting with a parishioner whose mother had been in hospice for two years. And in my heart, I said a prayer that I wish I hadn't prayed, which is that I hoped to God I'd never have to go through that long excruciating time. I knew as soon as I prayed it, that that would kind of be my fate. And so it has been.

In any event, the other day I was visiting with my parents. My father has been on a decline recently and he's sleeping more and more, and he has been unable to communicate well. When I would visit him, he'd be engrossed in a TV show or engrossed in his dinner or something like that. I came into the bedroom to see him and I put my hand on his forehead. He woke up and immediately said to me, "Billy. I love you."

And I was so stunned with that declaration. I was so stunned by it because over the past year I've been thinking about what our relationship has been. I've been thinking about what would it mean for him to say something like that to me? What was love for him? What does it mean for him when he said I love you? And what does it mean for me to hear this declaration from this person who has lived an unusual life? My father spent a week in a Moroccan prison. He was a pilot, a swashbuckler, horseback rider. He was in many ways, the antithesis of who I am, and yet he said, "Billy, I love you." What did that mean?

I decided in that moment, because we were afraid that last week was going to be yet again, another moment in which he passed away, I decided that I would put to the side social distancing rules and I hugged them and I kissed his cheek and I smelled that unmistakable smell of him. And I was transported to the first time I remembered smelling my father and my father having a distinct smell. It was when I was really little and he came back from a trip. My mother went into my room and she picked me up and she brought me into the living room and laid me on his chest. And I remember my little sleepy head landing against his chest. And I remember his smell when he was home.

"Billy. I love you." What did that mean? Over the past year, I've been wondering what great purpose God had and keeping him alive for so long. And I think some of that was revealed in that simple declaration. What is love? What does it mean for us to say we love somebody? When I was in graduate school, I did extensive study of the philosophy and theology of love. It was the major topic for many of us in the 20th century. I read great arguments about love and about the priority of love, great definitions of love. Anders Nygren, Kenneth Kirk, John Burnaby, Martin Luther King, Paul Tillich, John Lewis. Love was the great problematic in the 20th century in part because everyone believed that love was the answer.

And when I hear these words today, and when I think back on that time, I realize that love is a mystery. Love is not something that can be relegated to the will. It's not a muscle you can flex. Love is not relegated to the emotions. It's not a tidal wave that goes past you and takes you up and sweeps you out to sea. Love is not merely the value we place on another or the value we find in another, or the friendship that gets cultivated between us, love is a mystery. It's the thing we need most. And it's the thing that we have the least control over. It's the thing that we receive as a gift. Love really isn't a thing at all, but a relationship.

Now, all of this is my way of getting into the incredible conversation we have today in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus and the Pharisees are embroiled in another debate about the commandments. The Pharisees ask Him to define what is the greatest commandment, and Jesus says it is to love the Lord, thy God, with all your heart, soul, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

We are tempted of course, because it is the language of command to see that the will is the primary place of love for Jesus. And the will is important. It's as important, at least, as the emotions. It's as important, at least, as the value we find or consign or the friendship we live into. But Jesus means more than simply a matter of interpreting the law, when He says to the Pharisees to love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

When Jesus speaks those words, there's a deeper subtext that's emerging in today's gospel that we begin to see just a glimpse of. And the conversation that happens right after when there's this debate, which seems again semantic over who is the Messiah and is the Messiah greater than the King who came before Him? And this of course is a debate about not only words but time. And the Pharisees can't imagine that the Messiah could be a greater person than King David. But in fact, what Jesus is trying to say is that something greater is happening in their midst.

The time they're experiencing is not a time of declension in which there was the good old days and then the afterwards, but rather that's something new was breaking into being. And all of this pivots around Jesus and love. For today's gospel happens in that moment between Jesus's triumphant entry into Jerusalem and His movement to His death and resurrection, that movement, that relationship is one of love.

So love is, in today's gospel, a kind of revelation. Love is not simply something that you can parse through concepts where you can define easily as much as we had noble intentions in the 20th century, to think that we could isolate love like we might isolate a virus. That to me is just hubris. But love is a kind of revelation. It's something that dawns on us and comes from a source that is greater than us. Love comes from God and love is God. We know this because Jesus is God's love perfectly revealed.

Love is a kind of knowledge. It's not just will, it's not just emotions. Love is a kind of knowledge where we see something deeper that connects everything together that connects each of us to each other. Whether we can be around each other or not, that love relationship is real. And when we see that love relationship, when it dawns on us, we understand that we are growing in our sense of things and our sense of ourselves. We're participating in a kind of knowledge that transforms us. And again, love is a mystery. It's something that we will never be able to hold in our hands. We'll never be able to flex our love

muscle, but it's a mystery that once it is revealed, we grow in knowledge and we are changed.

And finally in today's gospel, we see love as a way to God. As Richard Rohr says in a recent homily I listened to, there are two great ways to God. There is love and there is suffering. And those who suffer find their way to God. Those who love find their way to God. And those who love well, realize that these two paths are ultimately the same because at the end of the day, love requires sacrifice. And you will know what you love most by what you're willing to sacrifice for it.

Jesus, God's love, is standing before the Pharisees, interpreting the law, speaking about being the Messiah, walking on His way to His death so that we might have life and they miss it. We miss it. We miss the opportunity to experience that revelation standing in front of us. We miss the opportunity to step into that knowledge and so become wise.

I have two poems for you today, both of which speak about love as revelation and as knowledge. You could find it on page 11 in the bulletin, or you can simply listen. The first is by Molly McCully Brown, and it's called Transubstantiation. Brown writes from the kind of vernacular of her life in rural Virginia. And this is what she writes"

It's the middle of the night. I'm just a little loose on beer, and blues,
and battered air, and all the ways this nowhere looks like home:
the fields and boarded houses dead with summer, the filling station rowdy
with the rumor of another place. Cattle pace the distance between road
and gloaming, inexplicably awake. And then, the bathtubs littered in the
pasture,
for sale or salvage, or some secret labor stranger than I know. How does it work,
again, the alchemy that shapes them briefly into boats, and then the bones
of great felled beasts, and once more into keening copper bells, before
I even blink? Half a mile out, the city builds back up along the margin.
Country songs cut in and out of static on the radio. Lord, most of what I love
mistakes itself for nothing.

Most of what I love mistakes itself for nothing. The meaning of the poem, I think, is in some ways, given away by its title, Transubstantiation, which of course versus that moment in which Jesus blesses our bread and wine so that they become the body and blood of Christ. And so is with us in love intimately. And the poet here is doing a priestly act. She is consecrating with her words, the things that she sees that mistakes itself for nothing. The cows who are simply awake, don't realize but they are witnesses to the eyes of God. And the bathtubs strewn in the fields, these are playing part in this deep symphony of signs that are beautiful in the night. The country songs that are sung and pass in and out of the static of the radio. And a father who struggles with dementia, who says

drawing on something we know not, I love you. Lord, most of what I love mistakes itself for nothing. This is a poem about love as revelation. Of love as knowledge.

The second poem I have before you is an old poem. It was written in the 19th century. It's probably well known to many of you. It's a couplet, which means it's just a simple couple of lines that's meant to kind of rhyme internally and give you a lesson for the day. It's called Outwitted by Edwin Markham.

He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

But Love and I had the wit to win. To draw the circle wider, to include the other who rejects you. To include the other with whom you have an ideological debate. To include the other who opposes you politically or otherwise. This is not an act of surrender, but an act of outwitting by love. And this is a simple poem, but it seems to find its way home in this time in which we are struggling to find our way to love as a nation, as a community, as families, as friends. The true revelation of love is not in winning some ideological battle.

It's not even in winning an election. Love is victorious as revelation of the connection we have to each other, and the wisdom and knowledge that comes from it.

You and I have been called to love. In our collect for today, we ask God to increase the gifts of faith, hope, and charity. And that word charity has been translated from a Latin term Caritas, which is the love that brings us home to God. It includes all the loves of this world. And it is God's work in us. We can do nothing.

And so today I invite you to step into the love that surrounds you. Don't let your heart be mistaken by the things you see around you. They are all bearing revelation. Ask God for the eyes to see and the ears to hear the love that is surrounding you, because that song is meant for you. And as much as we want to claim the power to love, it is ultimately God's power working in us doing more than we can ask or imagine. So let us pray for the love which transforms us and changes us and makes us new.

Amen.

[End of Recording]