



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

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"The Spirit of Love" - The Second Sunday after Pentecost - 6/14/2020

Lessons for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

I speak to you today 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.

Last September, I was on my way to do a wedding rehearsal. It was a Friday, and had been one of those busy Fridays in which I was kind of moving around from meeting to meeting, to meeting. And I was rushing off and to get myself ready for the rehearsal, I thought I'd go and put on some more formal clericals.

And I got to the house and I opened the door. And it turned out that the cat had done something incredibly nuclear. There had been like a nuclear event that had occurred that she was the epicenter of. There was everything from both ends everywhere in the house. And I immediately calculated that this was going to take a lot to clean up and I didn't quite frankly have the inclination to clean it up. It was truly disgusting.

And so I tiptoed through the minefield of stuff, and I got myself dressed up to go to the rehearsal. I walked back through that minefield carefully avoiding every patch of disorder and found my way to the rehearsal. And I don't know, maybe it was because I was on my way to a wedding rehearsal that I was supposed to officiate at, but I suddenly realized that by going through that minefield and going back through that minefield and by not cleaning up after the cat, I was somehow kind of violating a basic covenantal rule of marriage.

And so my conscience got to me as I reached the top of the driveway and I picked up my phone and I called Claire and I said, the cat has created some kind of nuclear event in the house. And I'm rushing to another appointment. I just wanted to let you know I've seen it. And she said to me, it's okay. I saw it too and I tiptoed past it too. And I suddenly felt this kind of rush of that relief that you feel when someone no longer is going to hold something against you and that resentment drops.

And I went off and I did the rehearsal and everything was beautiful. I was even invited to go to the rehearsal dinner at the last moment. I turned it down, but then

they said, oh, come on, there's a seat. But I said no and I went back and I cleaned up every bit of that nuclear event. And I did it because I realized that I loved Claire and I wasn't looking for any kind of leverage in terms of the infinite scales in which we balance our lives together as human beings. I wasn't looking for some way in which I could say yes, I don't have to help with that because I cleaned up the nuclear event that the cat left behind. I simply did it because I realized it was going to be a small gesture of love. And that changed the whole nature of the practice, the whole nature of what I was doing in that moment. I was doing a work of love.

I begin with this story because we are beginning this time in which we are looking at the fruit of the Spirit, and the first fruit is love. And love is key. It's in some ways, the kind of source of every other fruit of the Spirit, because love is at the core of the gospel promises of Jesus Christ. We are invited into a loving relationship with God through the sacrificial love of Jesus, and that love is powerful and real and is meant to be in our lives wherever we find ourselves. Love is defined as the fundamental willingness to place the good of another above yourself and above your own sense of goodness.

And so when I engaged in that moment of sacrifice, that small moment of sacrifice, let's not overestimate or underestimate cleaning up, you know, cat vomit and poo. But in that small sacrifice, I was carrying on the kind of sacrificial love of Christ. And that filled me surprisingly with joy. And the challenge of being a Christian is that you and I are called to love as Christ loves in big things and in small. And that calls us into these moments in which we sacrifice a bit of ourselves for another.

In our reading from Romans today, we have two points that I want to emphasize because this speaks to us particularly about the sacrificial love of God. And that sacrifice is shown at the end when Paul says, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." God proves His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

So Christ the Son of God, the Word of the Father, the Logos of God who was made flesh shows His love for us by dying for us so that we might live by placing our good ahead of His own. And then the second point I want you to see in this passage comes a bit earlier, which is that because we are able, Paul says, to endure suffering, which produces endurance, and endurance which produces character, and character that produces hope because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

So the second point of Christian love is not just that sacrificial love is key, but also the fact that God's love has been poured in us. And love is an interesting thing because it's not a muscle we flex, although it is an act of will sometimes. And it's not a mere desire we have, because sometimes we do out of love something we don't want to do. Love is a kind of relation with the other, with the Beloved. We

make the Beloved's good higher than our own and this is often called in the New Testament, agape. And accompanying agape are many other forms of love, which God has placed in this world so that we would have a fullness of life.

And in fact, these other loves tend to attach themselves to the love of agape. And so there is the love of Eros, the love of ecstasy, the love of loving someone so much that it causes you to experience profound delight. And you experience that in romantic relationships. You experience that in romantic settings, like sunsets that you sit before or sea shores, that moment in which you are taken out of yourself almost by the desires that you have within you. That love is just as real and exists just as powerfully. Although in that moment, you're not so much as conferring love upon another or lifting up their good, but their good becomes your good, and your good answers powerfully to the good you do with them.

And then finally there is the kind of bond between the lover and the beloved. And that bond of love becomes stronger the extent to which we are able to give to each other our full selves. And that love is important because too often we can ask sacrifice of others but not be willing to enter into a sacrifice ourselves. And that bond of love between the lover and the beloved is kind of a bond of trust. It's kind of a bond of relationship. It's kind of a ground out of which we are able to do any work of love or justice.

We live in a world in which there is a need always for love, love in terms of that sacrifice for the other. Love, in terms of that agape, there is no parent-child relationship in which we do not experience that love of agape. And we also are living in a world in which we need that love of Eros, that love of delight because this world is so full of beauty, and the sadness and tragedy of our life is sometimes we don't see the beauty that is always around us.

And finally, we live in a world in which we need that bond of love, that connection we have to each other, that kind of friendship or *philia* is the Greek that is used for it. We need that love in our lives to make our societies just, our societies good, our societies decent, our societies loving. All of those kinds of love God has placed into this world and somehow has shared with us because in God's love is a relationship in the Trinity between a lover and a beloved, and the love between them, the Father, the Son, and the Holy spirit. This is what Augustine said, and this is what many Christians have argued for years.

When we discover love in this world, when we do anything as mundane as cleaning up cat vomit or poo, when we put the love and the goodness of another above our own wellbeing, when we are delighted by another, when we are in love, when we experienced that bond of trust between us, that helps us go through thick and thin, those are actually echoes of the love that already always exists in God. And the mystery of Christianity is that through God and Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I are filled with love and capable of loving, fully,

and you and I, whenever we see love in this world, we are right to see the fingerprints of God. And the love of God showed to us in surprising ways.

I have a couple of pieces of art that help bring this point home for you. The first is from the poet, Robert Hayden, a wonderful poet. One commentator says that Hayden's poetry is such that there's never a line that's out of place. Never a word that's too much. It's all there for a reason. It's all there to be unpacked. And this is a poem he wrote called *Those Winter Sundays*.

Sundays too my father got up early
And put his clothes on in the blueblack cold
Then with cracked hands that ached
From labor in the weekday weather made
Banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking
When the rooms were warm, he'd call
And slowly I would rise and dress
Fearing the chronic angers of that house

Speaking indifferently to him
Who had driven out the cold
And polished my good shoes as well
What did I know, what did I know
Of love's austere and lonely offices?

Operating in this poem is an incredible kind of haunting of the Holy Spirit. You can see it in the title in which Hayden writes *Those Winter Sundays*, which is the day of rest for many, but the father who has worked six days out of the week, still gets up and gets the fire going and shines his son's shoes so that he can go to church.

And church is not mentioned explicitly, but is implicit in that it was church. Where the writer of the poem would go and find his full dignity and status in this world recognized in a powerful way, even though he was from a poor family. And that love which the father gave to the son was an austere and lonely office.

The word "office" means not just a place where you file papers or work on a computer. An office is a kind of appointment, a place of meeting. So we call in our own tradition, the daily office, a time in which there is a meeting for prayer. And so when he writes, "love's austere and lonely offices," Hayden wants us to see that the father's adoration of the son was a kind of keeping of an office of adoration, a kind of office of love that seemed in the house that was struggling with all that houses of that sort have struggled with, the kind of resentments and anger and normal ways in which too many people in too small a space often feel.

Those Winter Sundays is a story of love. And it goes with the grain of what we read today in Romans. But it also goes with the grain with an incredible line from 1 Corinthians. When Paul writes in chapter 13, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

So running through this poem is the recognition by the writer that the love that he had experienced from his father, the simple willingness to sacrifice for him was a love that he was now learning so that he could be an agent of love, a lover of God in this world. What did I know? "What did I know of love's austere and lonely offices?"

This is a *cri de coeur* that calls out to all of us who have ever had to sacrifice something of ourselves so that our beloved would flourish. This is also a reminder that even though we don't know of Love's lonely offices. And even though sometimes the love we give and moments of self sacrifice seem profound and isolating that God knows, and that God walks with us. And that when we love another, in such ways, we are going with the grain of Christ's love and Christ is with us. And in fact, we could not love in that way were not the love of God poured, as we read today in Romans, from His heart into ours.

The second image I have for you is this incredible simple piece that was done by Eric Gill in 1927. Gill had spent most of the 20s trying to kind of process the trauma of World War I. And he began to do these incredible drawings that were simple and powerful and went with the grain of the arts and crafts movement that is used in this church and in Cranbrook campus.

And this is the soul meeting the bridegroom. And you see here that the bridegroom is not just any bridegroom, but is Christ the bridegroom through the beautiful halo that is behind Him. There are gestures in here that reach back to some of the classic medieval practices of portraiture. And there's this wonderful, almost iconic drawing of hair and you see Christ holding the soul.

And the soul is typically portrayed in classic Christian theology and spirituality as essentially feminine. And so every soul wants to be married to Christ. And so there is in this incredible intimate embrace, a kind of completion of love. The love that Christ has given for the beloved, the love of agape that has been given for the beloved receives an echo and a response of love back to Christ. And this creates a kind of wonderful moment of desire and intimacy and ecstasy. And there is that love of Eros that is bursting forth between the two lovers. And finally, there is the bond between them that holds them together in a tight embrace.

And in this all there is one note I want you to see, one gesture that is incredibly important. One innovation that Gill does that is so subtle that you almost miss it.

Which is that in most of these portraits, when you see them in classic Christian iconography, Christ is never blinking His eyes. It's the soul. It's the people who are imperfect like you and me who blink or close our eyes. But in this portrait Christ Himself has closed His eyes and is now resting in the arms of His beloved. Christ is entering into that vulnerability, having given Himself for us, that vulnerability of resting and dropping His shoulders and letting Himself be beloved by the soul.

And this, I want to suggest is Gill's understanding of what it means for Christ to dwell in us. It is for Christ to close His eyes and rest in our arms, as much as we are called to close our eyes and rest our arms in Him. And this is to suggest a powerful moment in our love relationship with God. Which is that love often begins with sacrifice, but it leads to a kind of deepening of relationship so that wherever Christ goes, we feel called to follow out of love and in search of, and respect for the trust and bond between us.

And this goes with the grain of another great hymn to love. We read in 1 John, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." Where is the shape of your love today? What kind of love relationship do you have to bring back and maybe kindle a little bit in your life?

Over the past pandemic, I spent my time cleaning the bathrooms because I wanted to somehow recreate that moment in which I cleaned up all of the cat vomit and poo out of love for my family, out of love for my wife, Claire. And I did an okay job cleaning the bathrooms, but it was simply a gesture of a deeper love relationship.

At the end of the prayers today, I invite you to give thanks to God and to look for God and his love, which is above all things and in all things. Let this next week be a time in which you are aware that you are beloved of Christ. Christ has died so that you might live. Christ's love fills your heart and sets you free to love God and to love everyone in ways we can scarcely imagine.

Amen.