



If It's Not About Love, Then It's Not About God

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan
Trinity Sunday~May 27, 2018*

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Psalms 29

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| 1 | Ascribe to God, you heavenly beings, *
ascribe to God glory and strength. | 7 | The voice of God splits the flames of fire;
the voice of God shakes the wilderness; *
God shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. |
| 2 | Ascribe due honor to God's holy Name; *
worship the Most High in the beauty of holiness. | 8 | The voice of God makes the oak trees writhe *
and strips the forests bare. |
| 3 | The voice of God is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders; *
God is upon the mighty waters. | 9 | And in the temple of the Holy One*
all are crying, "Glory!" |
| 4 | The voice of God is a powerful voice; *
the voice of God is a voice of splendor. | 10 | God sits enthroned above the flood; *
God sits enthroned as King for evermore. |
| 5 | The voice of God breaks the cedar trees; *
God breaks the cedars of Lebanon; | 11 | God shall give strength to the people; *
God shall give the people the blessing of peace. |
| 6 | God makes Lebanon skip like a calf, *
and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox. | | |

Romans 8:12-17

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the

Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

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You may have noticed the new banner we put up on the wall, with this quote from Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's sermon at the royal wedding.

It's an assertion that's good and true. I believe it. But as you've heard me say before, I think love is a lot more complex, and a lot more difficult, than we generally like to admit. Because if love were as easy as we sometimes make it sound--"Just Do It," so much popular Christianity seem to say--then I think we'd be doing a whole lot more of it. I think we'd be living in a much more loving world. So something...something stands in the way of love.

You see: although the God that we Episcopalians profess is a lot less condemnatory than many other versions of God out there in American Christianity, I'm not sure we Episcopalians are really all that much better at love than most other Christians.

We definitely talk about love more than most. But I think that often, what we're really talking about is something more like acceptance. And proclaiming acceptance just isn't the same thing as practicing love.

Now, it's not my goal to squelch the excitement around Bishop Curry's sermon and about the Episcopal Church getting some favorable attention in the media. But I do think that all this hoopla has led to a fair amount of preening and self-congratulation. And if ever there's something that I feel called to preach against, it's: preening...and self-congratulation.

A lot of what I've been hearing this last week, you see, are well-cloaked versions of:

"We GET Christianity, and most of the rest of you really don't. It's too bad you haven't heard of us before, but we kind of enjoy being a well-kept secret. Anyway, we're glad you're finally noticing and appreciating us. But you should know that if you want to hang out with us, it's only going to work if you're just as liberal and accepting and loving as we are."

Now, this might be a bit overwrought. But I don't think it's too far off base. We struggle to accept people who are unaccepting. We have trouble really loving people who are unloving. And we continue wonder why the world is ever more factionalized, ever more at war with itself.

Yet still, somewhere deep in our hearts, we remember Jesus good old words: But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless those that curse you, do good to those that hate you, and pray for those that use you and persecute you. (Matthew 5:44, KJV, redacted).

These words are not what we want to hear, of course, but Jesus isn't much interested in telling us what we want to hear. Jesus is interested in giving us the medicine we need, even if it sometimes feels like a bitter pill.

You see: the way of love is, more often than not, a way of suffering. Because loving our enemies always has a price.

And I'd venture that if Bishop Curry had preached a sermon about suffering love, few of us would be nearly as excited as we've felt this past week. We'd probably be a bit embarrassed, just as the disciples were embarrassed when Jesus was sentenced to execution by the state. When the man they thought was the Messiah was crucified, died, and was buried.

Now, I need you to trust me that this is all going somewhere, because I've got to draw in another thread.

You see: today is our yearly observation of Trinity Sunday. It's the day we're supposed to get excited about the whole God-in-three-persons business that can so often feel so very abstract.

In today's reading from Romans, however, we hear a portrayal of the Trinity that moves beyond abstraction. There are no theological gymnastics here, but rather, a eminently practical Trinitarian spirituality. A way into God.

Paul says:

When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

This one verse encapsulates something so beautiful, I think. An image of the Trinity working laboring even to incorporate us into itself. To bring us into the divine life. God attempting to share Godself with us. God wants us to live and move and have our being within the matrix of eternal self-giving between and among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And that's just the thing: the very nature of God is to be self-giving. So to participate in God means to participate in self-giving. And self-giving is a tall order in a culture that prizes self-preservation.

Self-giving love, then, is the ultimate expression of our humanity, because it is the very nature of our Creator. One theologian says is this way:

Creation is no accident but [is the very] "logic" of a God who loves unto the end, who creates humanity in the image and likeness of God. Our "imaging" of God is not a matter of power, of prestige, of transcendence, but of humility, of self-emptying, of love. Of learning to dwell according to the order of gift, rather than the economy of exchange. And true happiness is only possible once we have given ourselves away in love in imitation of the Triune God.

Self-giving love, therefore, is about far more than having the right ideology and the right politics. Love is about getting personal—with ourselves and with others—and living our lives in a whole new way.

On Friday, my boyfriend Luke and I spent the morning with The Simple Way, a community of Christians living in Kensington. You may know of The Simple Way because its founder, Shane Claiborne, has preached here at St. Peter's. He's also pretty famous.

I've read some of Shane's writing and have long been inspired by his decision to move into a neighborhood experiencing deep poverty and to live side-by-side with long term residents with the primary goal of being a good neighbor.

On Thursday night, I got an email from the community director, who organizes the monthly open houses. She

said that Shane had been called up for jury duty. And she wondered: did we still want to come? A little disappointed that the star would be absent, I nevertheless said we were still planning to come.

I didn't want to come off as so immature that I'd lose interest just because Shane wasn't going to be there.

There were 3 visitors and 4 Simple Way community members present on Friday morning, in the living room of a Kensington rowhouse. The other 5 scheduled visitors had opted out. I felt spiritually superior for having shown up anyway.

Among the Simple Way community members, there were 2 white women, both who had relocated to the neighborhood, as well a Latino man and woman, both of whom were long-term Kensington residents.

As the morning progressed, without Shane's presence, I had a compulsion fill his place by making decisions about who was most important in the room. About who I wanted to learn from. About who had valuable information. About who I could most relate to.

And again, and again, I chose the white women. The long-term Latino residents had so much knowledge, so much devotion and love, so many obvious gifts for neighborly connection and relationship. And yet, I still focused on connecting with and learning from the white people: from the people who didn't have to be there. From the people who were making a conscious decision to live among the poor.

I presumed that they somehow had more wisdom to share with me than the people who were just plain old poor.

I didn't fully realize I was doing all of this until we left. In the car, I remarked to Luke: we probably wouldn't have come if there weren't some white people there, if the community were solely comprised of neighbors of color, trying to live the way of Jesus together. We probably wouldn't even have known that the community existed. And we probably wouldn't have presumed that we had as much to learn.

As I began to realize all of the dynamics that had been at play, I grew frustrated with myself. Because I can talk a big game about racial equity. But I don't often put myself in places where poor people of color, are experts from whom I need to learn. I don't often presume that poor people, people without much formal education, have all that much to offer me. I tend to think that they need my help and my resources, rather than the other way around.

So for me, as I think today about what being drawn deeper into the life of the Trinity might look like... as I think about what self-giving love might look like... I wonder if it looks something like: me consenting to learn from people who I don't always think have much to teach me? Maybe especially poor people of color?

I wonder if it looks like checking my ego and admitting that there are a whole lot of important things I don't know—think I can only learn from people who've lived very different lives?

I wonder if it looks like giving up all those parts of myself that stand in the way of connection, of community, of communion?

We so easily think of self-giving as meaning "giving more away." Giving more of our time, our resources. Giving until it hurts a little. But what if self-giving also means giving away our ego our pride our assumptions our

prejudices. What if it means giving away all those parts of ourselves that we feel make us superior to others, unlike others, unable or unwilling to connect across differences.

Giving away all of these parts of ourselves, these parts we've held onto for so long... well, it sure can feel like suffering.

It's painful to realize how separate we've been. How unnecessarily separate. To realize how much our lives have been governed, even for the most liberal among us, by a fear of difference. People can be different over there, but we surely don't want them to come and be different in here! We spend a lot of time and energy and effort maintaining our strong boundaries.

But then...here comes God, God the Holy Trinity, paying no mind to our boundaries... welcoming all of us right into God's life—saving us a seat as heirs with Christ, of all the good promises of God.

It's an audacious welcome. And it can be a life-changing welcome, if we'll let it. Because it welcomes us into living as audacious welcomers and lovers, too.

Because what's the worst that could happen?

He was crucified, died and was buried. On the third day, he rose again. He rose again.

And so will we.

Amen.