

Sermon: "Where Love is"

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First Reading: -from Song of Solomon, Chapter 8

Set me as a seal on your heart,
as a seal on your arm;
For love is strong as death,
relentless as the nether world
is devotion;
its flames are a blazing fire.
Deep waters cannot quench love,
nor floods drown it.
Were one to offer all he owns to
to purchase love,
he would be roundly mocked.

Second Reading: — *from Inaugural Address 2009 by President Barack Obama*

It is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which this nation relies. It is the kindness to take in a stranger when the levees break, the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job which sees us through our darkest hours. It is the firefighter's courage to storm a stairway filled with smoke, but also a parent's willingness to nurture a child, that finally decides our fate.

Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may new. But those values upon which our success depends – hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism – these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history. What is demanded then is a return to these truths. What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility – a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task.

This is the price and the promise of citizenship.

This is the source of our confidence – the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny.

Sermon: “Where Love Is”

The inauguration of the President of the United States is inspiring to witness – the ordered, powerful transference of power reminds us of what the human spirit is capable of. What co-operation looks like. The high calling of citizenship.

But especially this year, I was aware of the many secret service officers walking beside President Barack Obama as he and the First Lady walked down Pennsylvania Avenue. Apparently double the normal force. Twice as many people as usual who were needed and were willing to take a bullet for their new President. They were willing to die defending the life of their new leader. And during the President’s inaugural speech, the camera focused on one African American sailor, who was standing at attention in the crowd, his rifle pointed down. This image was broadcast right at the moment when President Obama was talking about service and duty and responsibility.

Later that evening, I heard the PBS film maker, Ken Burns interviewed on TV – and he talked about Obama’s reference to hope and virtue. Hope, we have been told, has been the hallmark and calling card of Obama’s campaign. And now hope was linked with virtue. As Ken Burns noted: “Virtue only occurs in the present – and virtue is an action. Something that is embodied in the world.”

Etymologically the word virtue is about the way you conduct your life. Your virtue is what excellence, strength, worth and courage look like when you walk out into the world. It is not just the capacity to imagine value or integrity, it is the ability to apply it, to practice it. Virtue has been called a habitual excellence – an activism, an engagement that is always at play. But this is a particular kind of work, not grudgingly accepted, but seized gladly.

I hope you got to see the cellist Yo-Yo Ma’s face as he performed the beautiful new arrangement of “Simple Gifts” at the inauguration. His was a portrait in joy. Ask yourself, “Where does such a gift come from?” How does such a virtuoso (the same root as virtue) rise to such heights of musicianship and genius?”

Friends, who visited Tanglewood this fall, went to a Saturday morning rehearsal in which Yo-Yo Ma was the principal player. Usually these rehearsals last one hour. After playing once through the entire concerto with the orchestra, Yo-Yo Ma was soaked through with sweat. He announced that they would play the entire piece again, and then again. A rehearsal that might have ended at 10:30 a.m. lasted until 1:00 p.m.

My friends wondered out loud, “Did Yo-Yo Ma, arguably the best cellist in the world, need to practice?” And the answer is clearly that he seized such an opportunity gladly. It was a chance to serve, to work with his instrument and his fellow musicians. That was his privilege, his responsibility, his calling.

If you wish to play well, you will have to become fully engaged. You won’t be able to “phone in” your commitment. If you wish to love, if you wish to serve – if you want to be in right relation with your friends, your community, your church, your country, your world – you are going to have to bring all your heart, and all your mind, and all your soul to the task.

There is no clearer parable in the Bible about the nature of this service, that each of us is called to give, than the story Jesus told about the Good Samaritan. You all know it. The oppressed and despised member of the racially mixed Samaritan tribe was walking down the

road when he came upon a man badly beaten and robbed. And where the more privileged and prestigious members of that society had failed to assist their fellow human being, the Good Samaritan stopped and saved this man's life – took him to an inn and paid for his stay so that he might recover.

We know the tale so well. But we don't consider our part in the drama.

If I were to do a midrash, a creative commentary and elaboration on the parable, I would have a good time imagining what was going through the minds of those who left their fellow traveler bleeding on the road and hurried on. I would divide the uninvolved, the disconnected, the estranged and/or the cowardly pedestrians into three groups: the blamers, the distracted, and the fearful.

The blamers are always among us. They say, "Tsk, Tsk. What has society come to! Why can't the authorities keep robbers off the road? What did this man do to provoke such a brutal attack? Surely my younger, stronger, more affluent travelers can clean up this mess! (I helped someone ten years ago, I've paid my dues when it comes to assistance!)" The blamers are certain that someone else must take responsibility.

Then there are **the distracted**. They are very busy and very important, and have schedules to keep – and other priorities. If only you knew what was on their plate, you wouldn't dream of asking them to assist a stranger!

Finally, there are **the fearful**. They have just been presented with the hard evidence that there are robbers on this road. They need to rush to safety. They aren't brave enough to stop on such a perilous journey. They need to protect the little they have (and they certainly don't have the resources to take on the long term rehabilitation of this seriously wounded man.)

But why stop with imagining those who could not and would not help? Imagine how terrible it would have been if love and rescue came along (in the form of the Good Samaritan) and the robber's victim rolled up into a ball and said, "I don't trust Samaritans. Go away!" What if the injured man was a Unitarian and wanted to know whether the Samaritan was smart enough to help him, or strong enough, or experienced enough (wanting to assess the qualifications of his rescuer, rather than receive his help.) Or worse still – what if the victim of the assault had already given up hope and had shut his eyes, and withdrawn and refused to be moved or touched or carried or cared for? What a tragedy that would be, if love was there and ready to help, but the man had decided he was going to die and refused to accept any assistance whatsoever!

We have all known fellow travelers (and frequently that traveler is ourselves) whom life has beaten up. Sometimes it was our parents who delivered the blows. Sometimes we get beaten up by hurricanes, or ice storms, or tsunamis. Sometime people are beaten at work. Quite a few of us are being beaten up by this economy, and many of us are newly aware that there are robbers on Wall Street. We can be beaten by the death of those we love, by illness, or injury, or heartbreak. We can be beaten up by armed conflict or prejudice, or disabilities. And all of these forces (and many more) may appear to diminish our capacity to see love, or to accept kindness, to embody virtue, or to believe in what is true. Hardship can leave us asking only one question: "In this broken and often cruel world, where is love?" Where is the love that can rescue the oppressed or heal me? (music, a duet from the musical *Oliver*)

Where is love?
Does it fall from skies above?
Is it underneath the willow tree
That I've been dreaming of?
Where is she?
Who I close my eyes to see?
Will I ever know the sweet "hello"
That's only meant for me?
Who can say where she may hide?
Must I travel far and wide?
'Til I am bedside the someone who
I can mean something to ...
Where...?
Where is love?

Who can say where...she may hide?
Must I travel...far and wide?
'Til I am beside...the someone who
I can mean...something to...
Where?
Where is love?

The journey on which we find out the answer to that question is often a hard journey. At least it has been for me recently. May you never be awakened at 1:30 in the morning, as my husband and I were awakened Thursday morning ten days ago, to a doctor in the emergency room of the hospital saying that our youngest child has been seriously injured in a bicycle accident, and is about to be taken into surgery. We were told that David's injuries were not life threatening. What had happened to our 21 year old son was that a cable came loose on his bike while he was riding down L Street in Washington, D.C.

He had been thrown over the handlebars going about 25 miles per hour. The face plant that resulted broke both his upper and lower jaws, fractured his nose and most of the bones in his face, and took out most of his teeth. Luckily, there was no brain damage, no danger to his eyes, no involvement of the spinal cord.

Five hours of surgery later, eight metal plates now holding his face together, and four days in intensive care his recovery is proceeding – but it will take at least a year to heal from this accident.

I drove down in the middle of the night, absolutely convinced that I would bring him home as he recovered from this horrific event. But David disagreed. And within 24 hours I understood why. He was lovingly surrounded by his apartment mates, his ultimate Frisbee team, and a collection of classmates and friends that offered him support, comfort and courage.

When I arrived in the waiting room of the ICU at George Washington University Hospital, there were ten classmates sitting in the lounge waiting to get a chance to see David. There were four in his room (even though there was a two person visitor limit in ICU) – and the parade of friends never stopped for the six days he was in the hospital. Many friends came to see David, and most came more than once.

They came because as young adults they had some important questions to ask of David (and of themselves.) *What does it mean that someone young and handsome can be so disfigured so quickly? Is he OK? Would I be OK? Can I show up for him? Would my friends show up for me if something this terrible happened to me?*

What surprised me, what surprised them was that David was “cool”. He was rather relaxed (and part of the credit must be given to the pain killers he was on.) But still he met his visitors with courage and humor and the assumption that they would still like him, love him and keep him company no matter how beaten up his face was (and believe me, it was bad.)

And after his well-wishers learned that, that this was survivable and that you (and your friends) are capable of a strength and a love you didn’t know you possessed; they wanted to come back to that hospital room because there was joy there – good company – life – grit. David said he was considering getting a “grill”; a set of metal teeth. His older brother walked in, and after the shock of seeing the black eyes and the swollen face and the conspicuous absence of teeth, Robert said, “Well, there is no question as to who is now the good looking brother!” And David replied, “Well, you had to wait awhile, didn’t you?”

In that hospital room I found out the answer to the question, “Where is love?” It was in those young adults and their willingness to enter the room and embrace their friend when he was broken and bruised and damaged. It became clear to me that David wasn’t coming home to recover with his mother and father. He needed to stay in Washington, D.C. where his beloved community was – where he could maintain his adult status – where he would heal and return to his life.

And now: the confession. I don’t know what David knows. If this accident happened to me, if my face had been destroyed, I would want to put a bag over my head and say to my family and friends, “I’ll see you in a year.” Because sometimes I’m afraid to be seen in public if I’m having a bad hair day. Some of us know that we are loved and whole and accepted (no matter what) and some of us don’t. But I’m in awe of David who understood that the door

needed to remain open. He needed to let people in. He didn't have to be afraid to let his friends see him just as he was. And they did rescue him. And they rescued one another. They discovered that a college friendship can be deeper and more enduring than they thought. All they had to do was show up. And all David had to do was to let them in.

Which I believe, with all my heart, is what we are trying to create at 90 Main Street. A place where love is. A place where people show up and where we learn how to let love in. A place where we are constantly reminded that we cannot be so broken that we cannot be made whole again. A religious community where your truth is welcomed and so is your neighbor's. A congregation where we are called on to practice virtue – to act on behalf of homeless children and their families – to be community where we are given constant opportunities to remove all the rusty locks that keep others out. A place where no matter how injured we are (economically, emotionally or physically) we find here music and hope, encouragement and acceptance. And a newborn “confidence, the knowledge that God has called us to help shape an uncertain destiny.”

Together – this is not only the price and the promise of citizenship. It is also the price and the promise of discipleship.

This beloved community will not envelop you like a warm blanket or a gentle fog; especially if we have our eyes tightly shut and we are holding our breath, and thrashing out at anyone who comes near, or locking our hearts against strangers.

Love cannot force its way into our brains because love will not use violence or force to knock down our defenses. No, here we are invited to open our eyes, to open the door of our heart, to ask for help, to let other human beings close to us. We are called to gladly seize the opportunity (and the privilege) to serve.

Then we can find where love is and that “there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character” than “giving our all to a difficult task.”

One night in Washington, D.C. last week I was driving to my friend's house after a 10 hour day at the hospital in the company of 11 of David's 21 year old friends. I think I was as tired as I have ever been, and I became hopelessly lost. The further I drove the worse it was. I spent time in Rock Creek Park and behind the National Cathedral, and in a neighborhood with roads so twisty that I no longer knew north from south or east from west. It felt like I had stumbled into a Buddhist Hell Realm – “abandon hope, all you who seek the kingdom of Connecticut Avenue.” But as I crested a hill there was a policeman quietly parked at a corner. I drove up behind him, got out of my car, and said, “I am so lost! Can you tell me where Connecticut Avenue is?”

And he looked at me with pity and said, “Sure – lots of people in Washington, D.C. are lost! Just take this left, the next two rights, then go around the circle, take the second left, then turn right...” And then he saw my expression. And he said, “Don't worry. Follow me. I'll lead you out.”

What I believe is that none of us are so lost that God can't lead us home. None of us are so broken that we can't be made whole. The work we are called to do is a privilege – the service we can offer to one another is a blessing. And our losses and our triumphs are a part of a much larger story than we can imagine. So we sing – gladly. And we move forward – together.