

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | John 3:1–17

Date | May 30, 2021



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

I cannot tell you how immensely grateful I am to see you here today. It feels like the beginning of what I pray will be a joyous journey as we re-gather in this place, welcoming more and more of the saints here over these coming weeks. If you feel yourself tearing up a little this morning having been away from this church building that is so dear to our hearts, don't worry, I suspect you won't be alone. There's a lot of life that each of us brings here, a lot we have all been through. My invitation now to you is simply to lay those burdens down, and find your rest upon this holy ground. Allow the wood to take your weight and the light of the windows draw you in, and these walls soaked with prayer recall for you just how much this place and these people have been a refuge in your life. Welcome home.

This homecoming today makes me think of that beautiful poem by the West Indian wordsmith Derek Walcott, called 'Love After Love'. He writes,

The time will come when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome, and say, sit here. Eat.

You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you
all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.

Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

For that is what we're doing here, as odd as we all look, roped off and dutifully muted during the hymns. We're here to feast again. To greet again. To love again, in ways that only places like this one can teach us. Yet the lessons of this school of love, as the Christian mystics so poetically dubbed the church, are hard. Don't just love your neighbor, love your enemies too. Pay wages one and the same for a full day of work, as you do for the labor of those who arrive right at the eleventh hour. Start living by letting your ego die. Discover your wealth by divesting yourself of all of that treasure cluttering your heart. And while you're busy pointing out that speck in your neighbor's line of sight, do notice the log in your own.

This school of love is a school where the lessons are learned alongside the joys and pains of life. Our griefs and our losses. Our gains and deep thanksgiving. The church is where so much of life meets itself: births, deaths, new beginnings, deep relationships, and ever-increasing circles of friendship, constant reminders of the vast diversity of life. We welcome you back to a home that claims us rather than we it, named and loved as we are by Christ, whose body is always shaping our own, teaching us how to live ever more fully into the abundance of the triune God, the God in trinity who never stops giving love away.

So what lessons in love do we hear today in the scriptures? What might we see of ourselves in them as we trace again in this place what it means to be formed as followers of Christ?

The first lesson belongs to Isaiah, for whom I think it is fair to say we all might have some sympathy. Faced with what theologians call a theophany, a grand and glorious manifestation of God filling the temple, with winged seraphs in song and flight, Isaiah's response is an understandable mix of inadequacy and despair. 'Woe is me!' he says, 'I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips'. Isaiah's gut reaction is self-doubt and unworthiness. Like Moses before him and Jonah and Peter after, when the fullness of the living God becomes present right before him he stalls, he shrinks back, he doubts that he is fit to go any further.

What a gracious gift that this would be our first instruction from the scriptures as we return to this our temple, because I wonder how many of us also felt that way in the darker passageways of this past year? Surely we have also doubted, and shrank back, wondered if the enormity of all that our lives have faced through these past months would be too much for us? For to learn how to love we must learn how to see others, which is often a line of sight that begins with us looking inward and recognizing that we are not immune from finding ourselves in an Isaiah kind of moment in our lives.

If Isaiah's self-doubt might help us foster such insight and compassion, it is his surrender that should give us hope. In a typically rapid biblical transition, Isaiah moves from self-focus to the main point of the scene before him: that God does not need him to become more than he is to answer the call. All that is needed is for him to muster the will to follow, that great confidence in the power of the divine love to give us all we need, a confidence enunciated in Isaiah's radiant words of conviction and hope, 'here I am Lord, send me'. Isaiah learns that he is already enough, just as we might learn that you and I are already enough, all that God has ever needed.

So welcome home to this school of love, where our doubts are met in the power of grace, a power enough to help us see that faithfulness does not require us to be especially holy, or righteous, or even ready, just willing to trust. Sometimes, though, love's encounter does not move quite so fast. In truth, more often than not, love requires us to wait for its due season to take root.

That is certainly Nicodemus's story, set in the Gospel of John's wondrous scene of a nighttime encounter. He and Jesus share an extraordinary exchange, spiritually rich and for some deeply consequential for Christian theology's doctrine of salvation. For those our more conservative siblings in the church, to be born again is to embrace the doctrine that those who are saved are those who believe. For me, though, the gift of Nicodemus's nighttime exchange is more mystical, and as such it is what I imagine happening after the words are spoken that says the most.

There's a late 19th century painting by Henry Ossawa Tanner of Jesus and Nicodemus that captures that possibility beautifully. Tanner pictures Jesus and Nicodemus sitting alone, in the still, blue light of night. In the painting, Nicodemus is leaning forward slightly, his back turned to us apparently looking straight at Jesus' face. Yet, fascinatingly, Jesus does not reciprocate. Seemingly unmoved, he is looking beyond Nicodemus into the middle distance. What is clear in the gospel is that Nicodemus needs more than he has received from Jesus. He asks three questions in quick succession, none of which it seems are given satisfactory answers, as he asks, 'How can these things be?' For all we can see, Nicodemus is at a loss, but in the painting at least, he is not then set apart. He is not asked to leave until he can figure things out. Perhaps, like Isaiah, he also has self-doubt but unlike his ancient forebear, there is no grand theophany to settle his theological conundrum. Nicodemus is simply left to dwell with Jesus, and to quote Walcott's poem once more, begin to understand how to 'love again the stranger who was [his] self'.

The lessons of love are thus deceptively simple. Accept how small you are. Embrace how little you matter in the scheme of all that there is. Yet do not to fester in self-doubt and stasis; trust that you are already all God needs to serve the love that calls you onward. Be willing to sit with your questions, even as they are left unanswered. Be skeptical. Name what you find hard to believe. Yet do not do so alone. Instead dwell with the Holy One who will forevermore dwell with you. It sounds so straightforward, yet these are lessons learned over a lifetime, which is why we need each other so very much.

We need each other to give and receive gifts such as these. We need witnesses to our best selves as well as to our failings, honest brokers on our way to the kingdom of God. We need people who will call us to more, and people who will extend the hand of friendship when we all we can do is be still.

Put simply, we need each other to be the church, and as such there's a great deal of good ahead of us in this place and time. On this year's anniversary of his death, we know that we need to do more than remember George Floyd's name, we know that we need to offer more than the accounts of our own hearts as we reckon with race in America, yet that more that love calls us to can only be discovered as we dwell with one another, waiting for the deep roots of justice to make home in us. As we look to the future of this block, and all that this church might be for this city in the next generations of this church, we will only know what it is that God calls us to when we linger long enough with one another to hear how the great passions of each of our hearts might meet the great needs of this world. In other words, love's feast is a slow-cooked meal. Love's emergence in our lives is a slow birth of wonder and grace. And most of all, love needs Christ its host to bring us in, and help us draw near with faith.

The table is set. The feast is prepared. Welcome home.