

Up until this pandemic began, one of my routines on Sunday mornings was to arrive at the church while it was still dark, read through my sermon a couple of times, and make a few last minute edits. About twenty to thirty minutes later, Vicky [our sexton] would arrive, knock on my door, and ask me how I’m doing. There were usually one or two answers: “It’s coming.” Or, “Vicky, I’m struggling. I just can’t get it to come together like I want to.” And without fail Vicky would tell me, “you know we’ve heard it all before. Just get up there and tell us ‘Jesus loves us’ and sit down.” And I’d consider it for a good while: I mean, no one has ever complained about a sermon being too short. But the rule-following, overachiever in me would decided that I needed more.

Well, after 6 years, I can finally say that Vicky is right. Short and sweet is best.

So, here goes:

Friends, Jesus loves us.

That’s it.

Well, that’s the heart of our Scripture reading this morning: love, love, love.

It’s an action.

It’s a sacrifice.

But we can’t love others until we first accept and live freely as people who have been unconditionally loved and made from the essence and source of Love itself—God.

Without that truth we drawing upon an empty, man-made well of effort and pride.

And yet...

The pandemic is killing our beloveds.

Our nation’s overdue racial reckoning is exposing our fault lines and seeping through every crack and crevice in our foundation.

Political animosity and disgust each new lows every day.

Instead of learning to write their name on lined paper, kindergartners are learning how to use the unmute button on Zoom.

And let’s not forget the exhaustion, loneliness, and financial uncertainty rocking us all.

As a friend confessed to me recently, “sometimes it doesn’t feel like Love is enough.”

Now, maybe your faith and trust in God's Love never waver.
Maybe you never get weary by the storms of life.
Maybe you never want to call someone who cut you off everything but a child of God.
Maybe this pandemic living hasn't affected you one single bit.
Maybe you're so confident in God's delight and your purpose that you never hesitate
 putting others first without complaining or moaning or judging or if it's worth it.
If that's you, carry on.

But for the rest of us normal people, I want to take you back to a slightly warm Thursday evening in Jerusalem and walk through what Love did and what Love didn't do. I want you to hear the story of Love and let it seep into your pores. And maybe—if only for this week—you can receive and embrace and claim this love like you've never claimed anything else. That Love, you see, was forged in a storm not unlike the one in which we find ourselves.

There in Jerusalem a young man of about 33 years gathered his closest friends near the marketplace and told them to meet him at sundown for dinner. They agreed to do so, and in a few hours they ended up in a room bigger than my living room. According to our buddy Luke, this man tore off a piece of bread that had been sitting in the middle of the table and said a blessing. Then he held up the bread and told his friends, "this bread represents my body. Eat it in remembrance of me."

Then he took some wine and said, "this blood represents the blood that I will soon pour out for you. It's a new covenant—and this covenant is unlike any other. It will have the power to trample even death's lasting power."

And so they all drank from the single cup of wine. Now, this man knew someone would betray him, but he invited his foe to come to eat, too, because, that's what Love does—it extends itself beyond what's comfortable and easy. And Love did it for them and for you. All those who gathered that night didn't quite understand what was happening. They had seen the healings. They had heard the teachings. They had enjoyed the meals. But they didn't really understand that everything that had come before that night was actually all pointing to this night and what was to follow. *Although they didn't understand, they still*

chose to say Yes to Love, because saying Yes to Love doesn't mean having the answers or being sure all the time. It means trusting one step at a time. And going.

And so they went onto the next day, which we now call Good Friday. It was actually an utterly horrendous Friday, but Love seems to have a way of bring beauty out of ashes. Much of the transcript of that day has been lost, but what we do know is this: according to the prosecutors, Love disturbed the peace, fomented insurrection, and rebelled against the Empire. He had protested. Peacefully. But Love had protested. And, those in favor of the status quo couldn't abide it one single bit.

Love didn't appeal their guilty verdict. "If questioning the status quo of fairness and competition and ruthless power and pull-yourself-up-your-bootstraps, each man and woman for themselves mentality is a crime, then I'm guilty Love said.

"Do what you will to me. I won't stop receiving you." The truth is, Love simply wanted more for the world to let it stay the way it was. So it gave of himself freely, sacrificially.

By now, you know how it goes—
the wood, the nails,
the thunder,
the darkness,
the vinegar,
the tears,
the wailing,
the blood,
and the final gasps of breath until there was no more air left.

Love died that day.

What's next everyone wondered?
"We can't go back to what was.
It's so hard to endure now.
What do we do?"

It was just enough for them to breathe.

So they cried and prayed and leaned on one another.

As they did so—lost in a fog of fear and grief—Love showed up—scarred and wounded,
the past a part of his present and *their* future.

This Love showed up to
friends who had given up.

Friends who were at their wit's end.

Friends who were certain the last 3 years of their life had been a waste of time.

Friends who were afraid to go on.

Friends who could not show their faces in public.

Friends who wondered what was the point of all.

Love went and found **those friends** and said to them, "A promise made is a promise kept."

And so they clothed themselves in his Love.

It sustained
and transformed
and uplifted them.

And having been embraced in Love and then extending that embrace to others, they knew:
this Love was enough.

Now, here we are: 2,020 years later in our tiny rooms,
apart
yet together,
longing to be fed by something greater than ourselves,
longing to understand what we can't understand,
longing for peace in a divided world,
longing for healing and justice in a broken world,
And wondering if it's still enough.
Perhaps we who sit in the hell of this year don't know it,
can't imagine it,
can't believe it.

We can't go back to what was.

It's so hard to endure now.

What do we do now?

But as it was then, so it is now: Love is not finished.
A promise made is a promise kept.

Love didn't do what Love merely to save you from damnation.
Love did what Love did to save you from the lies,
the hurt,
the failure,
the sin,
and anything that might try to get in between the source of creation and Love and you. **For ever.**

Love uprooted death's lasting power and gave us what we need to embrace others as God embraces them, to help bring our Creator's dream into its full glory.

This Love, you see, is not a feeling, it's a sacrifice.
It's letting go of control
and power
and right
and might
and falling into humility
and cost
and tears
and sweat
and humble brokenness made whole.
It's choosing not what's comfortable for us, but for the least among us.
It's resisting the impulse for ease and popularity over against truth and justice and power.
As Paul wrote to the Romans in the midst of their own struggles and despair, their own version of the year 2020, Love is not only enough. **It's the last word.**

So, maybe Vicky was right all along:
all I need to say,
all any of us could ever say is this: **Jesus. Loves. You.**

Whew.

Will you say Yes to this Love?

If you do,
if you wear this Love it as though it's the finest piece of clothing ever woven,
if you let it cover
and lead
and sustain
and uphold
and define you,
if you let the drama of what happened one Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday
in Jerusalem be
your anchor,
your guide,
your purpose,
And your essence,

...you will finally get the last word—that is, you and the God of all creation together.

Now...I dare you to find a purpose greater than that.

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