

“Called to Love”

Sermon preached by the Rev. Penny Nash

Trinity Sunday, May 27, 2018

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA

For God so loved the world....

We've been hearing a lot about love in these last days. In his sermon at the wedding of Prince Harry and Megan Markle last Saturday, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry asked the whole world to imagine a world in which love is the way. He talked about the transformative power of love - the love of God translated into all of our actions as God's people. He begged us to remember that sacrificial love is redemptive and asserted that when love is the way, poverty will become history, hunger will end, justice will be abundant and we will all be in right relationship with God and each other.

Then he reiterated that message in several TV interviews during the week. And on Friday, he preached about love again in Washington, DC, reminding us that above all, Jesus proclaimed this, the Great Commandment: love God and love our neighbors - all of our neighbors, he added, even the ones we don't like.

To follow Jesus means to love, and not just in a sentimental way. Those are powerful words. Bishop Curry preaches awesome sermons.

Now, we throw around words like “power” and “awesome” pretty casually these days, but in the Biblical sense, they are meant to convey things that are almost indescribable in mystery and in magnitude. Power in the Biblical sense is like nothing we've ever seen because it is an attribute of God. It is beyond formidable. It is beyond strong.

Isaiah tries to get at just how mighty God is by saying that just the tip of the hem of God's robe completely filled the Temple and that God is attended by six-winged seraphs, fabulous creatures who are crying out not just praise but also a warning - the most Holy of Holy Beings is near and that Holiness is so powerful that mere humans can hardly withstand being in its presence.

Isaiah is terrified in the company of such power. Woe is me, he cries. I am not worthy to come near something so mighty, so holy. But one of the creatures brings fire to purify Isaiah to make him worthy and the rest is history. God wonders: Whom shall I send to live among and speak to my people? And Isaiah famously responds, Here am I. Send me.

Isaiah answers the call of God. He is in a sense reborn, certainly transformed, coming to the Temple as an ordinary person like you and me and leaving it a prophet of God.

Thomas Aquinas, the 13th century philosopher and theologian known as the Angelic Doctor of the Church, says that humans are a paradox - the only beings that straddle the divide between matter and spirit (something Jesus understood but Nicodemus had a little trouble with). We live in a material world, and we also interpret the world, and we creatively act upon the world with freedom

and imagination. This is a reflection of the Trinity, to a certain extent - since we are made the image of God we reflect God's nature, which is, to quote British theologian Tina Beattie, "a unity of three persons in an inexpressible relationship of generative, communicative and creative love.... [T]he human soul manifests that [Trinitarian nature] in its capacity to understand, interpret and love the world."

Which brings us back to love. Love really is powerful and transformative, and like Isaiah, we are called to live out God's love into the world. Despite our foibles and flaws we have been made worthy through Jesus to be the bearers of God's love in a world that sorely needs it. The power of love is immense, awesome, world-changing. Our love is part of a greater love, the love that created us and saves us. And with a nod to what Jesus says to Nicodemus, we are called to act out of what comes from the Spirit, to transcend what we know so well of human frailty and love the world as God loves the world, indeed as God loves us, not in condemnation but with hope for the healing of every wrong and every wound.

This is an awesome task. Jesus is asking a lot of us when he calls us not only to love God but to love our neighbors in the Good Samaritan sense. Sometimes I feel like Isaiah, encountering the almightiness of God with fear that I'm not up to the task of loving God's people the way God wants me to. Sometimes I feel that there are just too many wrongs and too many wounds and it's all just overwhelming. I don't always feel ready to say here am I, send me.

Where I am in error, of course, is thinking that anything is all up to me. That I am supposed to change the world by myself through extraordinary feats. But it's the awesome power of God and God's love that changes the world. By walking in love in my daily life, doing my daily things remembering God and God's love, I am participating in that power, not providing it, for the transformation of the world.

We are relational beings formed in the image of a relational God and love is both what binds us together and what empowers our actions. And as Christians, it is as individuals in community that we live out our calling. It is all of us together who transform the world through love.

I see love all the time right here at St. Stephen's. I see it when folks in an Emmaus Group rally around one of their members who is in distress, bringing food or running errands. I see it on Mondays when volunteers assist the people who come to our food pantry while others sort and bag fresh fruit to give out to residents of Gilpin Court. I see it on Sundays when parishioners come to church bearing tuna and peanut butter with which to stock the grocery store. I see it on Saturdays when gleaners pick up produce donated by generous Farmers' Market vendors. I see it in the summer when breakfast is prepared for the children who come to math camp. I see it at night when a group gathers in a circle for mutual support and spiritual friendship.

And I see it farther afield, too.

I see it in people working for justice; peace; care for God's creation; and the nurture, protection, and welfare of children. In people who care for the sick and dying and for the poor and the homeless and the outcast and the stranger. I see it in people who are trying to love their neighbors, all their neighbors, as best they can.

Most of us are not called to be prophets like Isaiah. But we are called to love. It is love itself that calls us, love that is stronger than death. And thanks be to God it is love that gives us the power to answer “Here am I, send me.”