

My Song Is Love Unknown

A Sermon for St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church, Minneapolis

by The Rev. Craig Lemming, Transitional Deacon

Sunday, November 13, 2016

Proper 28

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalm: Psalm 98

Epistle: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Gospel: Luke 21:5-19

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer of all that is, seen and unseen. Amen.

I am very grateful for Susan's invitation to preach this morning's Sermon.

Although, at the time I accepted her kind invitation, I did not fully appreciate just how difficult this task of preaching would be since the Gospel appointed for today is Luke's version of *The Destruction of the Temple* which has now fallen on the Sunday following Election Day in the United States. It is for this reason that I bid your prayers that all our hearts and minds will be filled with the Holy Spirit, so that Christ's inestimable love for all people may be kindled in each of us, for the greater glory of God alone. Amen.

Grace to you and God's peace.

I am not white. I am an immigrant from Zimbabwe. I am bi-racial. I am bisexual. I am working class. I am an Anglo-Catholic Christian. All my life, I have known in my flesh, that many people, not all people, but many people believe that I am not

worthy of my full human dignity simply because of who I am. Many Americans, not all Americans, but many, consciously or subconsciously believe that I am less than human because of who I am, in my flesh. This vicious electoral season has uncovered and confirmed this reality; a reality well-known in the flesh of generations of fellow marginalized people; but until this week, perhaps this truth was not fully appreciated in the collective social consciousness of all American citizens. If you are not male, if you are not white, if you are not straight, if you are not American, if you are poor, if you are differently abled in your mind or in your body, if you are old, if your faith practice is non-Western, if you are illiterate: many people in this country, not all, but many believe that you are worth less. To deny the full human dignity with which God Almighty has imbued all of us as beloved creatures of God, each created in God's divine image,¹ is to afflict ourselves and others with suffering. Many of you this morning may indeed be suffering. I know I am.

The Greek Tragedian Æschylus teaches us that the one who learns must suffer; that even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon our hearts; and that in our own despair, against our will, wisdom comes to us by the awful

¹ Genesis 1:26-27.

grace of God.² Suffering becomes knowledge. Suffering becomes revealed truth. Suffering becomes wisdom.

As Christians, we identify, in our flesh, with a long legacy of suffering. God was made flesh in the life, passion, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Christianity is the only faith tradition in the world that is founded upon the incarnate God being fully present in the Crucifixion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The persecution of the early Christian Church lives on in our shared identity, in our flesh. About 40 years after the crucifixion of Jesus, The Siege of Jerusalem took place in the year 70 CE, which resulted in the complete destruction of The Temple. This calamity is so immensely cataclysmic that it is nearly impossible for us to imagine. To fully appreciate the existential plight of first century Christians, it is sobering to realize that, according to Josephus, 1,100,000 Jews and Jewish Christians were massacred and that 97,000 were captured and enslaved by the Roman Empire.³ This catastrophic apocalypse was placed in Jesus' mouth in today's Gospel:

² Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles and William Bedell Stanford (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 109.

³ Flavius Josephus, *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999), 906.

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, [Jesus] said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”⁴

The Temple – that ultimate symbol of faith, a place of sanctuary, a place of identity, a place of belonging, a place of Ultimate Concern – was destroyed. The devastating loss of The Temple for our faithful ancestors is unfathomable. Perhaps that is why the idea of a Temple becomes theologically reimagined by the Apostle Paul. Realizing our human capacity to make idols of our buildings, idols of our religions, idols of our governments, Paul admonishes the Corinthians, **“do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?”⁵** We are not our own. Our bodies are sacred. We belong to God and we belong to each other. As Temples of the Holy Spirit we are symbols of faith for one other; we are places of sanctuary for each other; we are a place of identity for the least, the last, and the lost; we are a place of belonging for each other; we are very members incorporate in the mystical Body of Christ.⁶ *The Idolatry of Empire*

⁴ Luke 21:5-6.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:19.

⁶ *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1986), 339.

often results in the extermination of sacred human life. Colonization, the conquest and cultural genocide of all First Nations' Peoples, the enslavement of Africans, Nazism, Apartheid, The Ku Klux Klan, The New Jim Crow,⁷ this long list of White Supremacy's idolatrous systems of oppression – each demonically ordained by fundamentalist Christians – goes on and on. That is precisely why it is important to be reminded that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. “For such a time as this”⁸ it is vital that we remind ourselves that black and brown bodies, women's bodies, LGBTQ bodies, immigrant bodies, differently abled bodies, old bodies, children's bodies, non-Christian bodies, are, each of them, made in God's image and therefore sacred temples of God's Holy Spirit. To love God is to love our neighbor.⁹ To love God is to have reverence for each other's bodies as temples of God's Holy Spirit imaged in our flesh. To enact this love takes courage. To love one another with Christ's radical love is indeed life-threatening. Today Jesus reminds us that,

they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to

⁷ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, revised ed. (New York: New Press, 2012).

⁸ Esther 4:14.

⁹ Matthew 22:37-40.

testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.¹⁰

I don't know about you, but I have struggled to love my opponents this week. I have struggled with the fact that I feel betrayed by relatives and friends. And as I collapsed in grief, terror, shock, and pain, it was in music – that eternal language of the soul – that I found the energy to endure. In Maya Angelou's words, "Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness."¹¹ In the loneliness of my relived traumas, not unlike those persecuted Christians of Luke's time, I could prepare no defense in advance. This humble sermon of mine, slowly took shape in my mind, and as Æschylus affirmed, even in my sleep, pain that cannot forget – all the pain of being bullied, abused, and hated simply for who I am – all that pain continues to fall drop by drop upon my heart; and in my deep despair, against my will, wisdom came to me by the awful grace of God. The Wisdom of God came to me in the words of my mother's favorite hymn: *Love Unknown*.

¹⁰ Luke 21:12-19.

¹¹ Maya Angelou, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, trade pbk ed. (New York: Random House, 2009), 1.

**My song is love unknown,
my Savior's love to me.
Love to the loveless shown,
that they might lovely be.
Oh, who am I that for my sake,
my Lord should take frail flesh and die?¹²**

Our song is *Love Unknown*, a song that needs to be sung more beautifully than ever before. Our song of *Love Unknown* is here at St. John the Baptist's Episcopal Church, a song that we began to sing together in the Spring. Michael Reed, Michael Morrow, Ginny Jacobsen, Barb Nicol, Beth Reed, Theo Sadler, Roger Rose, Mark Slade, Bill Hooke, Bill Grau, Melissa Olson, Ryan Curl, Russ Stephens, Mark Lindberg, Nathan Lindberg, Ivy Booth, Sarah Parker, Bob Seavey, Susan Tapp, Susan Barnes, and John Corlett: our song of *Love Unknown* soared as we struggled and labored together to bring the vision of "Kinship Across Lines of Difference" to life in Circle of the Beloved – the inaugural chapter of the Episcopal Service Corps in North Minneapolis. Our song of *Love Unknown* is being sung in new relationships across lines of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, age, faith, culture, language, and nationality; our Trinitarian song of Reconciled Diversity

¹² *The Hymnal 1982*, acc. ed. (New York: Church Publishing, 2001, 1985), Hymn 458.
Video: <https://youtu.be/HMart4wXsl0>

must be sung more robustly now than ever before. Our song of *Love Unknown* will drown out the din of division, so that, as we heard in the Book of Isaiah today:

**The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;**

...

**They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the Lord.¹³**

The Holy Scriptures are living documents by, with, and in which we make meaning of our existence through ancient, sacred narratives as God's people. As we prayed in today's Collect, God "caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning... to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them."¹⁴ Pioneering Pastoral Theologian, Anton Boisen recognized that each human being is also "a living human document,"¹⁵ worthy of our holy interpretation. As we go forth into the world today, as we meet those who have been and continue to be dehumanized, I invite you to consider that each and every person we encounter is indeed a living human document: a tender story, in the flesh, worthy of our attention and of our

¹³ Isaiah 65:23-25.

¹⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 236.

¹⁵ Anton T. Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (Chicago, New York: Willett, Clark and Company, 1936; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 5.

reverence. God's song of *Love Unknown* is singing in each of them, just as it sings in each of us. So,

**lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing.
Sing to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the voice of song.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
shout with joy before the King, the Lord.
Let the sea make a noise and all that is in it,
the lands and those who dwell therein.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
and let the hills ring out with joy before the Lord,
when he comes to judge the earth.
In righteousness shall he judge the world
and the peoples with equity.¹⁶**

Amen.

¹⁶ Psalm 98:5-10.