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## ***Throwing Ourselves into the Arms of God***

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John's Episcopal Church on 10-25-20*

*Consecration Sunday: Matthew 22:34-46*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each living creature Beloved. **Amen.**

These are pivotal times in history. Just how significant future generations will consider 2020 and its aftermath is yet to be seen. But we who are living through these times without benefit of a crystal ball can still see that the choices we make today will impact the future in significant and perhaps unforeseeable ways. At the end of May, which seems like years ago now, there was a New York Times article about a 1991 book which described what the authors predicted as “The Crisis of 2020.” In 1991, they predicted that 2020 would contain:

...an unspecified calamity that “could rival the gravest trials our ancestors have known” and serve as “the next great hinge of history.” It could be an environmental catastrophe, they wrote, a nuclear threat or “some catastrophic failure in the world economy.”

Even though this might sound more like an article from the Inquirer than anything scholarly, these words are eerily appropriate for what we have experienced in 2020—this pandemic, financial devastation, the crisis in racial justice, the

political election. Even though our personal lives in all their beauty and struggle also continue, we cannot avoid being impacted by the broader realities of 2020, because of the connectedness of all things—what Lakota people call “*mitakuye o’yasin*,” – loosely translated “for all my relatives,” each other creature on earth. So in the midst of these multiple levels of crisis, what is our refuge, what is our guidance? How truly can we live through these times with both integrity and solace, with strength and help?

The answer comes by seeing what matters the most. Many of you knew Russ Bremner, longstanding member of St. John’s who I’m grieved to say passed away just a few weeks ago. He and his wife Boo and their extended family Crandalls have been pillars of our community for decades. I had the extreme and sacred honor to meet with Boo and Ed and their families at Russ’ deathbed. I was so moved by the outpouring of love and affirmation they had for him. They told endless stories about how positive and easygoing he was. They couldn’t say enough good things about him. It was so beautiful. They all agreed he was a “glass half full” type person. I’m sure many of you have these kinds of stories about him too.

This outpouring of love, this generosity, resulted from their intimate connection with him as a loving person. He and his wife Boo generously invited our music director Chad to stay in their house during the first year of his ministry at St. John’s, when Chad’s wife Wendy and children were still back in Ohio finishing the school year, something Chad will never forget.

Russ, and Boo, are generous from the heart.

Love is the quality that shows up in both spirit and in action, and it stands the test of time, when people still are moved and warmed by the person's life long after they are gone. People like Russ. People like the saints we will celebrate next week for All Saints. People like Jesus.

In today's gospel reading we have the heart of Christian faith. A Pharisee, having heard that Jesus had silenced their theological archenemies the Sadducees, asks Jesus a question to test him. What is the most important commandment, he asks? It might be similar to the questions we heard asked of the presidential candidates Thursday night. What are your priorities? What do you think is most important? Why should we follow you and not another?

And Jesus answers with the words that all of us know:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul and mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these hang all the law and the prophets.

These are beautiful words that Jesus lived out in spirit and action. Jesus' healing love was so powerful that his risen life is still part of who we are today. In fact, the Episcopal Church has recently expressed this ancient love in a new way: the "Way of

Love,” the seven practices that help us experience and live what love looks like in the lives of real people in this real world, beyond romantic or sentimental or hypocritical words.

We know we need love in today’s world. Hatred and violence and bitter disagreement are everywhere, including if we’re humble enough to admit it, in us and in our families and the way we speak of others. Love can be hard to experience and to show in our actions.

So what is it that makes Jesus’ Way of Love really take root in our being? How can these seven verbs become more than flat and uninspiring words on a page, to be living guideposts on a journey following Jesus that is truly about non-violent, powerful, healing love?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor who lived in Germany during the Second World War. He utterly opposed the Nazis, because he knew that in Germany in the 1940’s, one could not truly call oneself a follower of Jesus and stand by while millions were being slaughtered, while hatred was being taught from the leader of the land. Bonhoeffer was murdered by the Nazis in 1945. He said that if you approach a relationship with Jesus in a mechanistic, legalistic way, like writing down these verbs on a page and thinking about them abstractly at arm’s length, they will accomplish little. The way to really love God and love your neighbor is to do something entirely else. It’s to throw yourself completely into the arms of the living God. It’s to be like Boo, who remained utterly in love with Russ to

the end of his life. It's to be like your child running to you for comfort when she is sick or hurt, or when he is so joyful to greet you at the door when you come home from work. It's to acknowledge our need and run, not walk, to surrender to the presence and love of the living God. This is why Jesus says that the first commandment is not to love our neighbors; it's to love God with our whole being.

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said this:

The popular image of Christianity has grown moribund. We have seen and mourned the capitulation of Christianity to selfish, self-centered instincts. How could Christians care so little about the poor? How could Christians defend racism and white supremacy? When did we sell our soul? .... We need a Christianity that looks more like Jesus... We need to knit the social gospel and evangelical gospel back together, because they are actually the same gospel... the Way of Love helps us abide close to Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

The Bremners and Crandalls had such loving affirmation of Russ Bremner because they were intimately close to him for many years. We need that intimate closeness with the risen Christ in order to be transformed and healed from the inside out. The seven verbs of the Way of Love aren't worth anything unless they have the rhythm of a heartbeat that we can hear from close up and practice in our own lives, like the heartbeats

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Curry, forward, in Courtney Cowart, ed., *Walking the Way of Love* (Church Publishing Incorporated, 2020) at ix.

of two people that start to pump in sync with each other. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, said that we need this closeness with the person of God in order to be transformed, because “you have to be in the water to learn how to swim.” You can’t learn to swim by reading about it. You can’t learn to love by studying love from a book. You have to experience it first hand, and since love is inherently relational, we experience the love of God by being in relationship with God.

Our nation will vote in nine days. Maybe it’s xenophobic to say this, but it feels to me like the whole world is holding its breath to see the outcome. But even more than this election, it matters that we become people who live the Way of Love. No matter who sits in the White House, to be people of love and healing requires something special of us. It requires that we experience ourselves as intimately loved by the God who made us. Our character heals and transforms when we abide in intimate relationship with the God who came in human form to show us the outrageous depth and breadth and length of that love, the love that would rather die a torturous death than to yield to hate or selfishness or fear.

One of the things you’ll hear me speak more about in the coming weeks is that our Racial Healing and Justice Discernment team has finally discerned what we believe the Holy Spirit is asking of the people of St. John’s. We listened very carefully to all of you and to God, and we believe God is asking us to follow Jesus’ Way of Love by centering the work of racial

healing and justice in our community. But we will not do this if we approach it at arm's length like a good idea. We will also not accomplish this by just trying harder. We can only do this, or anything else, by beginning with relationship with God. We must throw ourselves into the arms of the living God, and ask for God's healing for ourselves, in order to become people of healing for anyone else.

Today is Consecration Sunday, and we are all invited to support the ongoing mission of St John's through your financial pledge. Our stewardship goal is 100% participation. But I will tell you truthfully that I would rather see each of us throw ourselves into the arms of the living God and live from that place, than to receive one penny from any of you.

Let us begin the Way of Love anew by throwing ourselves into the arms of the living God, and practicing love by first receiving it. From that place of intimate closeness with the Person of Jesus, the Being of God, let us practice turning, learning, praying, worshipping, blessing, going and resting. We are called to a rigorous discipleship, to walk forward following Jesus the Healer, Jesus the Savior, in a world that is deeply troubled. We are called to do this together, and to make room for the different places we are all on in our journey. We can't do this by keeping each other or the idea of love or the being of God at arm's length. Let's admit our need for God, our need for help, our own need for healing, and experience the relief and comfort of surrendering to a reality that transcends the crisis of 2020. That reality is the depth and breadth and overwhelming

reality of the love and grace of God, the arms of God, that will hold us through the coming weeks and months, no matter what. Amen.