



Love is all there is

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

October 31, 2021 , Mark 12:28-34

Some of you know may know that our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry occasionally preaches from a text that is not in the lectionary readings at all. I figure if he can do it, I can do it. So I'd like to read to you from the gospel of John, a section that our Minnesota Bishop Craig Loya has asked the entire Episcopal Church in Minnesota to reflect on throughout this fall. Here is part of that reading:

Jesus said to his disciples, 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been pruned by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.'" (John 15:1-11, excerpts)

This joy that is complete, that is related to abiding in Jesus and the love of God, is surely a deep aliveness for which we yearn. It's the eternal life that the rich young man asked Jesus for in the gospel reading a few weeks back. It is a potent YES that we want to be able to say with our lives. Often that joyful YES seems beyond us in the everyday rollercoaster of human life. And we don't talk about joy much at church, despite Jesus saying right here on paper, we've got it in writing, that that's what he wants for us. But that doesn't end our longing for this kind of life.

As I look at the words of Jesus here, I see that this joy and aliveness must surely involve two things. First, clearly it involves a constancy of relationship with the living God that can only be compared to the union of a vine with its branches. This continual relationship allows the loving, healing energy flowing through Jesus to continue unimpeded in us like sap in the vine.

Secondly, it comes from recognizing what really matters and spending ourselves in service of that. This is what is being discussed between Jesus and Scribe in this morning's Gospel lesson. What are the most important commandments, the scribe asks? The two men agree that one must love God, and love our neighbors. These are more important than every other religious requirement—the offering of sacrifices, cleanliness requirements, giving of tithes, (dare I say even pledge offerings even if I'm now in trouble with the stewardship committee.) Jesus tells the scribe that the recognition of what is important puts him 'not far from the kingdom of God.' The difference between 'not far' and 'within' the kingdom lies in the move from seeing to acting. So to have this radical joyful aliveness, we can't just talk about loving God, loving our neighbor. We have to experience and enact this love.

Last week in Heidi's wonderful sermon she told a story about an English shepherd who, despite the endless hard work of his life, could lie on the grass with his dogs in a pause of his day, gaze up at the sky, and say, "This is my life. I want no other." He felt a deep longstanding connection with his sheep and the dogs, and knew they were thriving. It seems to me that he was experiencing joy and wholeness in living with purpose, offering all that he was and had for something that he knew was worthy of the gift, something larger than himself. The something he offered everything for was in fact not someTHING at all, but someONE.

Jesus is clearly teaching us this same lesson in showing that the someONE we seek is God, the one who holds out purpose for us. The rich young man we heard about a few weeks ago who has kept all the commandments still could not inherit eternal life until he had left everything to follow Jesus. Following Jesus would give him the essential everyday relationship with Jesus that would show him just how radical a love it was that Jesus embodied. Hearing about it would not suffice. For love must be found in relationship. One must love someone to move beyond words to reality. In today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, love is what made Ruth say to Naomi, I will not leave you.

Yesterday I had the poignant, heartbreaking privilege of presiding at the celebration of life service for our beloved Christina Huck, who passed away suddenly in July with no warning. When your heart is broken like that after a loss that takes your breath away, the only thing you can talk about is love. At such a time, faith may be shaky at best; hope is a word in a foreign language; the world itself does not compute. But strangely,

love is present in abundance. And wouldn't you know it, love is THE ONE requirement Jesus has of us.

Christina's sudden death made many of us consider our own mortality. If you were to die today, or someone close to you were to die today, what might suddenly be clear to you that you wished you had noticed a million opportunities ago?

I think we might finally recognize that love is all there is. Not sentimental love, not just the beautifully wonderful gift of erotic love though that is great; but agape, love that is unconditional and sacrificial and generous. Agape is love that is based on the essential truth that we are all already connected, whether we see it or not. That what I do affects each one of you, and what you do affects me.

We are all connected with the 400 years of people with black skin, who live with devastatingly limited health and well-being, and all our souls are compromised by these facts. We are connected with all persons whose visible handicaps keep too many from seeing their true humanity. We are connected with the child who is not your own, but whose trouble is known to you. Pausing when you're watching your favorite show because your child wants to talk to you, to be more connected, is a priceless investment not only in your child, but in the entire universe. Seeing the beauty of each other living being and making space for its wellbeing is what makes us alive. It's what gives us joy.

Our connection with each other derives from our core connection with the untameable God who is beyond all our conceptions. When we experience this connection with God, we can find that each moment of paying attention to those around us is a priceless gift. When we know of someone's suffering, it will be our great gift to help out. We can see the light in the countless tribes of Native Americans who are still here among us, and who should have what they need to thrive as others do. We will make loving room for the other, including our plant and animal neighbors, because the other is Christ, in his sometimes distressing disguise.

You see, Jesus' "Way of Love" we've been talking about for the past several years is not in fact a tired, reductionist metaphor for a mildly ethical life. In the end its purpose is to give us a real relationship with the living God who contains all of us. A relationship with God opens us up to the kind of disciplined generous contentment of the shepherd who has such an intimate relationship with the ewes and the creek and the dogs and clouds that he can say without hesitation, I want for no other life.

Today is Consecration Sunday. I sincerely believe that the Spirit has gathered us here this morning, those of us who are here in person, and those in their bathrobes over the livestream, and those who will read or watch this later. I believe the Spirit has gathered us here for an invitation—to be branches in the Jesus Vine, giving ourselves over to the experience of love. The Spirit's invitation is to experience the radical joy, the aliveness of Christ, by learning to let go of everything that does not matter and focus on what does.

Let's not waste time. Life is short. Let us be people of love. Let us prioritize love in our community and families and the world outside. Let us humbly seek relationship with the living God, the core love that is the foundation for all others.

What I'm describing is no less than an utter revolution in the way that we see and live and give. But that shouldn't surprise us, should it? Jesus is always turning everything upside down, making the last first. He is saying that there IS a God who is worth the utter love of everything that we are, heart, mind, soul and strength. He is saying that we can live lives split wide open, liberated from the tyranny of our own self-serving and even our own suffering. He is saying we can love. We must love. Love is all there is, the only thing that never ends. This is where we will find our joy, and make the Savior's joy complete. Amen.