The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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**Therefore…**

*Therefore, while I am imprisoned for the Lord, I urge you to respond to God’s love*

*by living a life worthy of that love: be humble, be gentle, be patient, be sensitive to your differences, but unified as God is unified, living together in peace. –* **Ephesians 4:1-16**

Several years ago, I was asked to preside at a funeral for a woman whom I had gotten to know in the nursing home. She had serious dementia, and I had visited regularly, not so much to visit with her, because she was past any real conversation, but to support her husband, who was always with her. Of anyone I ever met, he was someone who took seriously his wedding vow to be faithful “in sickness and in health.” He was always at his wife’s side, feeding her lunch and supper, spending the better part of each day with her. That isn’t possible for all spouses dealing with a demented spouse, but he was committed to it, and I admired him enormously for it.

When the woman died, the family suggested that a friend might want to do a reading during the funeral. This woman had spent a lot of time with the deceased before her death and the family wanted to show their gratitude for the time she had spent. So I contacted her to discuss the reading. She had a passage in mind, she said, from Revelations 21, a passage that says (and try to imagine this passage being read at a funeral for someone you care deeply for), “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

I was shocked that she wanted to read such a horrifying passage, so I asked her why she wanted to read it. “Because I want to be able to tell the family that their wife and mother is burning in the lake of sulfurous fire, and that is where they are going too if they don’t turn to Jesus.” Needless to say, we did not allow that woman to use the funeral as an occasion for her narrow and hateful version of Christianity.

But I still remember that episode because I had such a different experience of this family than she obviously had. *She* saw them as faithless because they did not share her understanding of faith. *I* saw an incredibly faithful family, who had supported and loved their wife and mother through some of the most difficult times in life. But *she* had not seen their faithfulness at all. *She* saw only their lack of faith, and sincerely believed that they would experience eternal torment as a result. *She* felt sorry for them.  *I* felt sorry for her.

I felt sorry for her because I think she fundamentally misunderstood the Christian message, as conditional love rather than unconditional love. She thought Christianity is bad news, that God is going to send us to hell if we don’t believe. But the Christian message is not bad news; it is good news, the good news of what God has done and is doing through Christ to heal and save us, before we believe, apart from any merit or lack thereof on our part.

The first three chapters of Ephesians articulate that good news, and then, at the beginning of the fourth chapter, the discussion turns to what that means for how we are to live, and the final three chapters of the book articulate the ethic that flows from the good news. The two sections of the book are held together by the hinge word “Therefore…” We are being saved through God’s grace, *therefore*, let us live gracefully with one another. And that is the right order: God’s grace comes first; our response is secondary. God’s saving action is not dependent upon our response. God doesn’t love us because we have faith, because of our loving and moral action. Before we have faith, love or morality, before we are capable of faith, love or morality, God loves us and acts to help us. If faith is anything, it is a gift, not something we take pride in, but something given to us so that we can be ministers of God’s love wherever we find ourselves.

The *therefore* is key to this passage. Our faith is a grateful response to God’s faithfulness. God is faithful first. We live in God’s world. God’s grace is the reality of our world. Once we realize that, there is only one appropriate response, and that is to live with a similar grace in our dealings with one another. It is not that God will love us *if* we love one another. Rather “God is love, therefore, we are to love one another.”

And, I think, that is the way that love works in our human relationships. In order to learn to love, we need to experience unconditional love first. Children who grow up in families where love is conditional, where they are expected to perform at school or on the sports field or at church, in order to earn their parents’ love, are often so damaged that they must struggle their whole lives to develop self-esteem and sustain healthy relationships. I hope that is not your own experience, but for many of us, I suspect that it is at least part of your upbringing.

In a blog post a number of years ago, Heather Wendte a writer from a small town in Alaska wrote about an older indigenous woman she calls Granny. Granny’s false teeth don’t quite fit, so she often goes without them. When she is walking outdoors in winter, and she walks everywhere, Granny wears red and yellow baseball catcher's shin and knee guards and a big yellow batting helmet, in case she falls. She thinks they are better protection than hiking poles and crampons and she figures at her age she is likely to take a tumble and get injured, and she doesn’t want to be a burden to anyone. Granny’s constant companion is her elderly dog, Sissy, who is very well-behaved, except that she whines when the sopranos sing the descant in church. And everywhere she goes, Granny also tows a cart of gear that she and Sissy might need, from a fishing rod, net, and pail to a mosquito hat and birding binoculars. So Granny is a bit of an odd figure.

But some of these odd figures are the saints who walk among us in disguise. And Granny is one of those. Just to give one, admittedly dramatic example, a few years ago, Granny left Sissy with friends and headed to London, England for the Queen’s Jubilee. She wanted to see the Queen's barge float down the Thames. She asked her priest to email her friend Father Michael at Westminster Abbey to let him know she was on the way. (Apparently she had been to London several times before.) She told her friends that she would return in about six months, and that while she is there she plans to minister to the London homeless whom she feels will be more shunned than ever what with all the Jubilee and Olympic hoopla this summer. She said she would sleep under bridges and tucked in alleyways with them.

Somehow I think that Granny, for all her peculiarities, has got the gospel message right. It is good news for all, before we have faith, before we have kicked the addiction, before we are old enough to understand faith and after we are too old to care much what others think of us. It is good news for the homeless on London streets and for those who live in the Senior’s Homes in Alaska, and for you and me and all us ordinary sinners and saints. Perhaps if you were watching the Queen’s Jubilee on television, you might have spotted an elderly woman with no teeth, and a big yellow batting helmet. You probably didn’t, because the cameras don’t linger on the Grannies of this world. But, today, let us give thanks for all the saints we overlook, or maybe even ridicule, because they have taken their teeth out or are wearing the wrong uniform, or sit quietly in hospital rooms out of public view. They are there in the world around us; they are here in this community too. They are within each of us, when we allow ourselves to love the way that God loves us, unconditionally. Thank God for the saints we overlook, without and within. Amen.

Celebrating a Prayer – *The 75th anniversary of “The Serenity Prayer” by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)*

 Sometime in the summer of 1943, in the tiny village church in Heath Massachusetts, one of the greatest American theologians of the 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr, worshipped while vacationing nearby. One Sunday they talked him into leading worship and at the last minute he wrote a short prayer on the back of an envelope. That prayer eventually was adopted and adapted by the Alcoholics Anonymous movement and has become famous, although few people recognize that Reinhold Niebuhr was the author. His original, which is on your screen and in your printed bulletin, was this: “God, give us the grace to accept with grace the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

Niebuhr began his career as a parish minister in Detroit, Michigan, where he quickly developed a profound sense of the injustice that pervaded every dimension of the car manufacturing industry and how workers were at the mercy of the powerful corporations. He was also profoundly influenced by the First World War, which shattered the optimism of pre-war liberal theology, which emphasized the human ability to continually progress toward the kingdom of God. In his first book, he described himself as a “tamed cynic,” a cynic because of his profound belief in the power of sin, which effected both individuals and the communities they create.

 But he was also a tamed cynic, because of his conviction that God’s grace is stronger than human failure. He became the leader of a theological movement described as Christian realism, because of its insistence on a realist understanding of the fallen nature of human life. But he insisted that such a realism should be in service of progress in social justice, especially economic justice, and not (as it often did) perverted (as it often was) into a bastion of a conservatism that served to defend unjust privileges.

As a tamed cynic, he always balanced optimism and pessimism, in what became known as a dialectical style of thought. For most of his career, he taught Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and that post is still named after him. Throughout his life he was a prolific and vocal commentator on the political life of the United States and the world, always warning against naieve and optimistic approaches to public policy, but always also calling us to the better angels of our nature (to use Abraham Lincoln’s pithy phrase). One short quotation will give you a sense of this: The human “capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but [our] inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”

Another of his famous quotations speaks of how we need faith, hope and love:

“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.

“Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.

“Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.

“No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.”
― [Reinhold Niebuhr](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/31146.Reinhold_Niebuhr), [The Irony of American History](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/781014)

But the most famous thing he ever wrote was scribbled on the back of that envelope in the summer of 1943, and has sustained generations of alcoholics and we other sinners, the Serenity Prayer.