



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER JULY 18, 2021
2 SAMUEL 7:1-14a; PSALM 89:20-37; EPHESIANS 2:11-22; MARK 6:30-34, 53-56

WE DON'T KNOW HOW TO LOVE GOD

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 [The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.]

Fifty years ago, two young artists presented the world's first rock opera about the life of Jesus Christ. Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice had collaborated on an album of songs the previous year but were finally able to produce their opera on stage. It was, of course, controversial. One issue was the treatment of the Resurrection. Apparently, in the opera, Jesus is taken off the stage during the final song looking dead only to re-appear at the curtain call, smiling and accepting

flowers. Hardly robust Christian theology and, perhaps, not compelling stage craft either.

This event came to mind as I pondered the Gospel reading for today. If it struck you as a bit boring, you are not wrong. It is a pastiche of part of Mark's Gospel with two miracles – one of the feeding miracles and the walking on water miracle left out from the middle. What we get reminded me of Jesus on tour around the Galilee. He goes one place and the

crowds flock to him. He goes somewhere else, and the crowds follow. One can almost see the “T-shirts” being printed – Jesus and His Apostles: The Galilean Tour – with the dates of his appearances printed front and back. Well, that notion led to the rock opera – Jesus Christ Superstar. Some of us are old enough to remember the music and lyrics – “Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, who are you? What have you sacrificed? Jesus Christ Superstar, do you think you’re what they say you are?” I will pause briefly so those in the know can hum the tune.

The other big hit is a love song offered by Mary Magdalene – “I don’t know how to love him.” Although I never saw the opera, I did have the pleasure of hearing this song presented beautifully by one of my parishioners at her high school recital. It was deeply moving, sung wonderfully and with great presence and emotion. It strikes me now that the deep attraction to Jesus that came from all those people in Galilee and elsewhere – the words and deeds that made Jesus a Superstar in his time is part of the plaintive thoughts of this song – “I don’t know how to love him.” I don’t know how to love him, what to do, how to move him. I’ve been changed, yes, really changed in these past few days, when I’ve seen myself, I seem like someone else. I don’t know how to take

this; I don’t see why he moves me; I don’t know how to love him.”

I think that is true for so many of us even today. We are drawn to Jesus Christ, we wish to follow him, yet we really do not know how to love him. Is Jesus a Superstar? Is Jesus the new David? Is Jesus the one to smite the Romans and return Israel to power and glory? Jesus performs miracles and swears everyone to secrecy. Jesus keeps moving and confounds his followers by breaking the rules and taboos of his day. Jesus spends as much time with outsiders, with tax collectors, with the disreputable and marginalized as he does with his followers. Jesus mocks the rich, the powerful, the comfortable. And some do turn away, unable to figure out how to follow this person. But we hang on, often confused and uncertain, but somehow drawn to the vision and charisma of this person. We seek a shepherd even as we are uncertain of how anything will turn out.

Paul speaks to this power of Jesus and the Creator God in his letter to the Ephesians. Those who were once far off have been brought near. The Risen Christ is our peace. In him, all groups have been made into one. The dividing line has been broken. In Him we are one new humanity. Through Him, we are becoming one holy temple in God. And yet,

we struggle to love God in Christ Jesus. We don't know how to love God.

As it has happened in the past, Grace came to my rescue as I wrestled with this notion of our uncertainty about God's love for us and our response to that perfect love. And I mean, Grace, my wife as well as grace from the Holy Spirit. She shared with me a review about an amazing book by Ellen Meloy, entitled, "The Anthropology of Turquoise: Reflections on Desert, Sea, Stone, and Sky." In the book Meloy notes that "language is the human effort to contain the uncontainable, the fluid, the nuanced into vessels of concept and category." So much for writers and sermonizers. She compares the paucity and weakness of language to the astonishing variety of colors. She notes that "our eyes are far ahead of our tongues." We can perceive seven to ten million colors through a synaptic flash lasting one-tenth of a second. No wonder I get confused and distracted at the paint store. She goes on to note that the concept of complementarity in physics tells us that "sometimes, a truth can be so deep, so elemental, that it requires no explicit recognition, no echo in language." She concludes that "this failure of attention will make orphans of us all."

There is the conundrum. God's love is so deep, so elemental, that it defies all language.

Our impoverished efforts to explain or categorize or capture the wild power of God's love as expressed in Christ Jesus are never going to be sufficient. Christ Jesus is Superstar, Healer, Teacher, Guide, Friend, Nurturer, and Listener and so much more. If we limit ourselves to human notions of knowing – then we will never know how to love God. We would do far better simply to watch a sunset while playing our favorite music than to write sermons.

But we can love God as best we may. And we are reminded of this complementarity in two places in our usual Sunday liturgy. We often open our worship service with the Collect for Purity. Based on Psalm 51, it has long been part of Christian worship. It is a radical statement of stunning import. On our behalf, the presider notes that to God, "all hearts are open, all desires known, and from God no secrets are hid." That idea should terrify us – it does me. That God knows everything about us – all of it – even the parts we won't admit to ourselves, should fill us with dread. But God responds in the opposite to how we think. God knows us deeply, intimately, completely, knows us to our core, and loves us anyway. And not just tolerates us but loves us passionately – far more than we love ourselves. We might not know how to love God, but God is love and pours out that love in astonishing abundance. We've been

changed, yes, really changed. When we see ourselves, we seem like someone else.

We are afforded an invitation to how we might best love God in the words spoken by the presider as we begin the Liturgy of the Table. Taken from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, we are invited to "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us." We are not walking toward love; we are not walking with love; we are to walk in love. Well, how do we do that? We walk as Christ did – loving us and giving of ourselves for others. And Christ loves us still and continues to give of himself for us. God

continues to love all creation and sustains all of creation through a continual outpouring of perfect love.

All artists learn quickly that there are no small parts, there are only small artists. That's true for followers of Christ Jesus as well. We may have a small part in the larger universe, and we may well be uncertain and confused about that part but all of us are capable of being large in faith. We just need to walk in love as Christ loves us and gives eternally for us.

Amen.



SAINT MARK'S
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