



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, JANUARY 30, 2022
JEREMIAH 1:4-10; PSALM 71:1-6; 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13; LUKE 4:21-30

TO LOVE IS A COMPLICATED BUSINESS

Luke 4:21-30 [Jesus began to speak in the synagogue at Nazareth: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.]

To love is a complicated and ancient business. Love is biochemical, neurological, it pulls in our psychology, and our spirituality. It's a small word, quick to say, but it's significantly more difficult to understand. "God is love," so love is going to be a tough one to fully define or understand.

I wonder if you've heard of the hormone oxytocin. It's been dubbed the "love drug." Oxytocin flows when we are actively loving, it bonds an infant to their caregiver, we're flooded with it when we're drawn to another

in attraction ... oxytocin is the bit about love that feels *really* good. From a very early age oxytocin forges and strengthens our relationships.

Interestingly, it's been suggested by researchers, that human bonding isn't just a really nice bonus of being human, it's actuality critical for survival. Humans become attuned to the key relationships in their life, and it's those relationships we seek out when we're threatened or if we feel we are in danger, we're driven to retreat to those

closest to us for stress reduction and to feel safe. And it's the "love drug," oxytocin, that reinforces this impulse, reinforcing friend over enemy, oxytocin points the way back to love and safety.

Science also tells us that human beings bond when we group together, and this can happen through a process that *can be* totally outside of our conscious awareness. Neurobiologists call it synchrony. It seems we might be hard-wired, as a result of our complex and ancient neurobiology, to do things **together** ... I don't just mean in the same place, and gathered ... I mean, literally, doing the same things at the same time. We are connected to, and driven by, a shared impulse to be in rhythm with those around us. Human beings will demonstrate synchrony whenever given the chance: when a big group of humans gathers and walks together, or runs together, studies have shown that human beings have 'herding' tendencies, crowds will synchronize their walking, people will fall into the same running rhythm when clustered together in marathons. These unconscious impulses remind us we each are so much more than autonomous sentence-making minds, there is much more going on in here than the thoughts I have or the ideas I might express.

At our most fundamental level, we are *ancient biochemistry and ancient physiological processes*, we are *embodied*.

And because of this, together, collectively, we *can be* incredibly powerful.

Canon Rosario-Cruz spoke in his sermon here last Sunday about his experience of joining Seattle's annual MLK march. He spoke of the buzz and the energy tangible amongst the people who'd come together for a common purpose. You might have experienced something like this yourself, at a protest perhaps, or at a live music event, out dancing, or here – in this worship space. When human beings come together, with common purpose, we *can be* so much more than the sum of our individual selves. When we connect, when we are safely together, when we feel part of the group, oxytocin flows ... and it feels good. Anything feels possible!

For good or for ill, perhaps.

Perhaps, like me, you find it shocking that the crowd that was just now praising Jesus in our gospel reading, is suddenly filled with such a great rage that they act collectively and with murderous intent, to drive Jesus out of town. But what if this is an example, an illustration of what a crowd, any crowd, might be capable of when it's driven by inherited instinct, when a crowd acts somewhat automatically,

to an extent mindlessly, in response to a perceived threat. After all, neuroscience seems to be telling us that the very same deep chemistry that brings us together, the very same processes that have us move and work together as *a body*, these very same things can, in a heartbeat, pivot to fear and hate.

Those physical processes in the body that teach us love and train us to seek out safety with the ones we trust, they are the same processes that can fuel hostility and intolerance.

The crowd in today's gospel reading knows Jesus. Initially they enjoy and praise his teaching. But as he continues, he shares a message that doesn't sit well with his hometown, and so Jesus is reinterpreted a threat. Given the scale of their response, we can assume quite a significant threat, a threat to their self-understanding, to their understanding of God, to their status quo. And so, possibly instinctively, they collectively and synchronously, as one body, drive Jesus out of town, with all that 'buzz and energy' that arises when we are in a crowd with a common purpose.

The very same aspects of our embodied humanness that help us to survive, can be the ones that turn a good crowd, bad.

Oxytocin and synchrony support love and kindness and can play a role in prejudice and intolerance.

As embodied beings, we'd be wise then, always to be mindful that we are instinct **and** intention, biochemistry, **and** rationality ... and it's the presence and practice of love that transforms a crowd of people, gathered for a common purpose, into the very real and healing presence of the Body of Christ in the world.

Given our embodied and encultured reality, the presence and *the practice* of love must be **intentional, must** become a practice, for it to one day become an instinct. *In this place* we can begin to build muscle memory around this, grow in the practice of connecting and bonding – in this place we stand, sit, and kneel together, we sing, and we pray aloud together, we share a Holy Meal together. Today, while you're here ... perhaps try it out, practice bonding through synchrony, practice being aware of joining with the movements of your neighbors. As you sing or pray aloud: practice *hearing* the voices of others, joining yours with theirs, practice being a part of the body, sensing the synchrony of the crowd, be here in full awareness of all those around you.

By love, with love, and through love we are transformed from a crowd of individuals,

who all happen to be in the same place at the same time, a crowd of individuals each of whom is vulnerable to those ancient inherited impulses that might prompt us to judge or to exclude or to fear “the other,” **with love** we are transformed from a crowd into to the Body of Christ.

Our common Christian purpose is love, and we can practice that love by each of us sensing, listening, and responding to the other, until through our bonding, our deepening connection, that love becomes an

impulse as automatic, as powerful, and as biochemical as any instinct, *even and especially* when we’re confronted by the unfamiliar, even when we perceive a threat, or a challenge to our self-understanding, to our deeply held beliefs, our firmest of opinions, or our status quo; then, when a love like that is cultivated by this body and made real in this body, when a love like that is *felt* by this body, then *this* body will be felt and known in the world as the Body of Christ, gathered for a common purpose as it is.

Gathered for love.



SAINT MARK'S
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