

Maybe I'm biased, but I'm pretty sure that back in Little Rock, I worked for the single best priest in the entire Episcopal Church, Scott Walters. Scott was a carpenter and then a contractor before he became a priest, and he's embarrassed by how soft his hands have become since he traded in his coveralls for clericals. Scott has a knack for not getting caught up in the minutiae of a thing. Maybe that comes from his years working on tiny details that come together to make an entire house, or maybe it's something wired into his being, but it's a trait I strive to emulate, both in my work and in my life. But Scott also loves good writing, especially poetry. He got interested in poetry back in college. Scott spent so much of his days working with his hands and then studying for classes that poetry became a way for his brain to rest. It's his love of poetry that points to a sort of contradiction in his person. Because, while he is able to keep the minutiae of life from overwhelming his purpose everywhere else, in poetry, he lives for the minutiae. Just the right turn of phrase or image or delightful rhyme, whatever it is, he leans in there. Maybe the delight for him is that it's a low stakes endeavor, at least on the surface. You can choose to read a poem and set it aside, delight in the art of the thing and then move on. Except, the magic of poetry, of course, is that you can never really just set a poem aside. It stays with you, maybe even works on you in subtle ways, changes something of how you see the world in time, opens up a way of being that you'd never considered or a perspective you've never known.

While I was working at Christ Church, Scott found an Episcopal priest poet named Spencer Reece. He'd just finished doing a Fulbright year teaching Honduran orphans how to write poetry and better yet, why they'd ever want to bother with writing poetry. Reece said for them, "Poems are freedom, [they are] spiritual suitcases." You take them with you wherever you go, and they comfort you. Poetry itself provides both a way in and a way out, like a set of keys unlocking a new door or protecting an old sore. Well, as you might imagine, Scott was so taken by this poet's approach that he called him up and got him to come to Christ Church all the way from his home in Spain. Now, that was cool enough, to spend some time with a poet of international renown and one that understood the life of clergy to boot. When Spencer arrived, all the clergy from Christ Church took him to a fancy dinner, and I'll never forget the conversation, a poem of its own. For some reason, Spencer - the poet - started talking about keys, literally at first. Lock, unlock, weight in your pocket, startling when they're lost, somehow pointing to your own failure of memory or routine or disorganization, relieving when they're found, but never relieving enough to make up for the way you beat yourself up when you couldn't find them.

Pretty soon, it started to feel like he wasn't talking about keys anymore, but I wasn't quite sure when the transition had happened. And before I knew it, he had us talking about scripture and how he has a set of keys he likes to keep handy when he reads the Word of God. One such key is Grace. What happens if I read this passage assuming it's a door that only the key of Grace can unlock? What do I find then? Another key is the Kingdom of God, maybe like the ones Peter carried. What happens if this door only opens with the Kingdom key? And another key is the Greatest Commandment. What happens when the door that needs opening only opens with the words of Jesus: the greatest commandment is this: Love God, love your neighbor. He's got more keys on his poetic keychain, but those are the big three, the ones getting a little worn down by use. I will admit to using the Kingdom of God key pretty regularly in my preaching. There's something beautifully communal in it that just feels right most days. But I wonder if I've used that key a little too much. I mean, there's nothing wrong with pursuing the Kingdom of God, but my Grace and Commandment keys (and a few others, too) are maybe a little shiny from underuse.

Take this story of Elijah coming to the end of his rope, certain he's going to die. If he stays put, Jezebel will have his head. If he flees into the wilderness, the wilderness will take him. And it's here we find him, desperate and sure the end has come. He passes out under the shade of a lone tree, and that's that. Until an angel comes, feeds him, lets him rest, feeds him again, and then sends him on his way. But maybe you take a step back, and instead of the surface-level facade, you're more interested in a door just there, the Greatest Commandment door and the key that goes with it. What does Elijah under the shade tree have to do with Love God, love your neighbor? Plenty, I think, and it has plenty to do with us, too.

It's Elijah's extreme faith that has led him down this road and into the Wilderness. He didn't ask to be born in a time when God's prophets were out of favor. He didn't ask to survive while his compatriots died, and he didn't ask to have blood on his own hands, either. But his faith, his love of God has carried him through all kinds of persecution and doubt. And still, his faith has led him to this place, full of pain and despair and fear. But even there, you can hear the bittersweet love in his breath: "It is enough, now, Lord." He falls asleep, presumably for the last time and an angel appears - embodied reassurance that God's love for Elijah is real, too. And it doesn't hurt that the angel brings some take-out. But of course, we can't just stop reading there. Just like a good poem, these stories work on us, spiritual suitcases carried alongside our own trials. It's a powerful and difficult thing to love God when despair overtakes and all good reasons to believe fall away. It's in that place that loving God becomes its most difficult and most sustaining. But with this Commandment Key, it's that angel that really has my attention. I want you to imagine what the angel sees, what you might think if you saw someone passed out under a tree. There's one or two kinds of people I know I wouldn't hesitate to check on if that's what I saw. An octogenarian passed out under a tree sets off my alarm bells! Must help! Must help! But a college kid? Or someone surrounded by empty bottles? Or someone who just looks "off" somehow? Like it or not, they're all neighbors.

I can be that angel, or at least serve like that angel, loving neighbor and, by extension, loving God, I can do that ... when I want to. But can I do it when I don't? Or when I'm afraid? Or when I think I know better than to get involved? All of a sudden that somewhat saccharine commandment gets real weighty and real fast. Love God and love your neighbor is easy to say and immensely hard to do. Thinking of Scott and his path, he'd bemoan just how soft his hands had become doing literal white collar work while so many Elijahs lay defeated under so many trees. And perhaps, perhaps ours have to.

I'll leave you this morning with a poem from that priest-poet Spencer Reece entitled "Margaret." It certainly carries the despair of Elijah under the broom tree, and maybe, just maybe, with the right set of keys, we can hear with angel's ears. Margaret, like so many others, is a neighbor that needs loving and maybe a glimpse of the God we serve. I give you, "Margaret."

I remember she rented a room on the second floor from Jenny Holtzerman, an Austrian widow. The two women lived on Girard Avenue South, in Kenwood, an elegant suburb of Minneapolis. Any promise of husbands had disappeared long ago. From the kitchen I often remember the jelly smell of a linzer torte. I was in high school and often I eavesdropped. Once, quietly, she said to my mother, "I never knew the love of a man." She had mentioned having a husband, but during the war they were separated in the chaos of Budapest, and later she lost track of him. Once she showed me her room: the walls were bare with cracks. Her daybed was narrow, barely slept-in. Her room resembled hundreds of scant little rooms around the world, the way it accepted blue and purple-violet detail—on her bureau, no family photographs, instead, playbills autographed by cast members, a calendar tattered, crossed, marked, no jewelry, some coins. Her window sashes warped, her wires shorted and the paint around her doorframe kept chipping off—"like in *The Cherry Orchard*," she said, "by Chekhov." She told a joke in Hungarian

to Hannah Tamasek and even I, not knowing a word, laughed. She bowed gently in a mannerism distinctly Viennese and spoke on occasion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. She loved the Guthrie Theater, where curtains rose on miniature worlds, preferring memorized dialogue and costumes to something truer. Five feet tall in orthopedic shoes, she limped. Time has a way of rearranging things and I could have most details wrong now, but there was this: during the war, she met a man, whom she gave money to, she did not know the man well, but had trusted him to smuggle her father across the border, the man pocketed the money, bought chocolates for his mistress from Belgium, and placed Margaret's father on a train to Auschwitz. So it makes sense to me now that simple decisions baffled Margaret. It makes sense to me now that when news reached us of Primo Levi's suicide, Margaret did not blink. It makes sense to me now that when Dr. Sikorski spoke of fighting in the Warsaw sewers, Margaret said, "I do not believe in God." Those who saw what they saw grow fewer. Margaret has been dead a long time now. But perhaps you will understand why I chose her, why I have smudged the slow waltz of her smile and added only a few modest blue strokes—here and here. As you leave Margaret behind and turn the page, listen as the page falls back and your hand gently buries her. This is what the past sounds like.