

Phew. Hi. It's, uhm, it's been a minute. Good Lord, is it good to see your faces, to be back in these robes, to grab 'hold of this pulpit, and to just be with y'all again. You know, there've been a lot of Sunday mornings that I've heard that St. Thomas' bell tolling at 9:00 o'clock. Some of those mornings, I've imagined what's happening next door, some I've felt tears well up, and some, if I'm honest, some of those mornings, I've rolled over and put a pillow over my head so I could get back to sleep! But most of those days, I've been aware of what's been missing. What's been missing while I've been away, it wasn't God. God wasn't going anywhere. What's been missing was you. These rafters. That choir. Those windows. The chill of a winter wind when someone opens the doors and the stagnant heat when somebody shuts 'em.

At Christmas, I was reminded of Murphy's Law. "Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong." After Christmas, I tried, y'all, I tried to keep trucking. I'd even done myself a favor in the lead-up to Christmas and written a couple of weeks' worth of sermons ahead of time. Easy enough to pop on Zoom, read those, and then go right back to sleep after everyone logged off. But the Ordinary Time that followed was anything but. Rather than celebrating the arrival of the magi, I mostly slept, and I mostly prayed. That line from Psalm 9 was a regular companion: "weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning."

In Lent, we say the sick are exempt from fasting, and I took that to heart. I ate mightily, and I rested, and I tried and tried to get back to health. And you know what's weird? I missed the fast of Lent. Usually, when Lent rolls around, I'm aware of the absence of some thing I've given up. But this year, I became aware of the absence of an absence. I hungered to be fasting alongside all y'all and to be taken to the places that only Lent takes us. But the absences I had not chosen stood between me and the rest of the world, and during Holy Week, especially, I was grateful for the depths that my faith has accompanied me to in the past, as though when the abyss loomed deep and yawning, I had a safety line stored up, tied around my waist to hold me true.

And then came Easter morning, and those bells rang, and I stood at my kitchen window and listened to the music pouring out and your proud voices and your jubilant alleluias. It might be strange to say this, but even though I wasn't in this building, there was something about that moment, wearing pajamas and sipping coffee, that confirmed my sense of calling. Yes, I really am a priest, and yes, I really am this place's priest. Down in my bones, I felt that. Down in my bones, I still feel that. Weeping may've spent a lot of nights, but joy sure came that morning. And since then, it's just been a duel between illness and stubbornness, time, and faith. Along the way, I know where my struggles appeared. I'm gonna share some of those later this morning, but I also know y'all had a couple come up, too. This church has endured so much in the past six months. I know some of those things, but there are many I'm sure I haven't heard a peep about just yet. I want to. That's what I'm here for, and I've got a lot of catching up to do. Y'all've had some weeping nights, too, and I'm hopeful that joy already came or will come yet.

Also, there've been a few things happening beyond our church, beyond my convalescence, beyond your steadfast faith. I would be remiss if, in my first chance back with y'all I didn't address at least some of 'em. In a moment, I'll be reading a statement put out by the Bishop's Office. But before that, I'd like to sneak in a word or two myself. We all know that churches have limitations on involvement in politics, at least in theory. As someone who tries to play by those rules, it's immensely frustrating to see parts of American Christianity getting a pass. I've been told on many occasions that I shouldn't be so political and that I really should do a better job of upholding "the Middle Way" of Anglicanism.

First off, in my time as a preacher, and maybe even more so, in my time of recovery admittedly spending a bit too much time scrolling through news articles and social media posts, it seems to me that when people say "don't be so political," most of the time, what they're really saying is, "don't say so many things I disagree with." This is the same thing that got the prophets, Jesus himself, and a long line of preachers in trouble. Now I

don't want to say that my word is right up there with Jesus', but I do do my best to take what Jesus says to heart and apply it.

Second, that whole "Middle Way" is a core concept of Anglicanism. It's the result of a compromise that brought Protestants and Catholics together after a dangerous time. The point of the Middle Way was not to drop ourselves down right exactly in between any two opposing sides. It was to blend what was good and true and right and live together from there. For you scholars of the era, I'm oversimplifying this greatly, but I hope you'll let this pass, just this once, I promise...maybe. There's a dark joke that goes, "Meet me in the middle," says the evil man to the good man. So the good man meets the evil man in the middle. The evil man takes a step backwards, smiles, and says again, "Meet me in the middle." Our Middle Way, correctly applied, is a gift. Our Middle Way abused silences our calls for justice, peace, forgiveness, and grace. You see, as is becoming more and more evident, the sicknesses of our society are borne by every member of society. None of us escapes the erasure of rights, none of us escapes the collective sins of our country, none of us escapes the weeping that spends the night. So we fight for the joy to come in the morning and for that joy to come for every last one.

But it's bigger than that. We are judged by both God and this world not by how good we are at being Episcopalians, but in the very way Jesus said we would. How do you suss out the true prophets from the false prophets? If y'all know this, call it out! You will know them by their fruits. So, what are our fruits? What does God and the world see and know about us? And what they see...is that what we want them to see? If our fruits do not point to the all-embracing, non-judgemental, ever-expanding, unconditional love of Christ, then we have no leg to stand on when we ask folks if they've ever thought about coming to church. And that, my friends, that would be a long night of weeping, indeed.

So, how do we do that? How do we preach the Good News of Jesus Christ in a way that doesn't involve a football field or an act of religiously fueled legislation? Folks, we start by loving our neighbor. I know, that's gotta be some Pollyanna conclusion we can chalk up to the preacher's lingering brain fog. Truthfully, though, it's not. Loving your neighbor is where we start, but we've got to make a practice of expanding our idea of who those neighbors so in need of our love are. And let me just stop you before you go to the place where "love" gets contorted into a means of control. That's not love. That's a perversion. If we have to justify to ourselves that what's really abuse is love if we just turn around three times and squint, then we're in the wrong church, we're in the wrong business. That love's a poisoned fruit. But this love, this love is not poison and it's not a cop out. This love is a revolution! This is the kind of love that cares enough to name what's wrong, to name blood on hands, cruelty in hearts, arrogance in faith. No, love your neighbor. Really love them. Love your neighbor.

Love your Christian neighbor.

Love your Muslim neighbor.

Love your patriotic neighbor.

Love your neighbor.

Love your straight neighbor.

Love your gay neighbor.

Love your trans neighbor.

Love your neighbor.

Love your homeless neighbor.

Love your neighbor that just cleaned their great-grandpa's gun or changed their grandmother's diaper.

Love your neighbor that just got an abortion and love your neighbor that's worried what'll happen when the abortion they had 30 years ago gets found out.

Love your neighbor that sits in the Supreme Court or Congress or the White House.

Love your hungry neighbor.

Love your weird neighbor.
Love your difficult neighbor.

Love your neighbor.
Love your neighbor.
Love your neighbor.

I can't say it enough, love your neighbor! Because when we love our neighbor, when God's love wins out -- and make no mistake, it will -- when God's love wins out, weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning.