

Sermon for Easter Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Happy Easter!

If the past year has taught me anything, and my God has it taught me more than I ever wanted to learn, if the past year has taught me anything, it's that I love y'all. I know, great way to get an audience on your side, right? But really, I love y'all. Some of you I've known for years now, and some of you I have never met. Or if I have, I apologize, my memory ain't what it used to be. But still, I love you. Some of that love is what I'm kinda used to, the love of friends or family, the kinds of love we talk about a lot. One of you I love like we're in the movies. But I don't think any of that is really what the last year has taught me. I knew I loved my wife, I knew I loved my best friend, I knew I loved my dogs. I knew I enjoyed Hamilton and working here, but it wasn't until all that went away so abruptly that I realized the part of my heart you'd taken. I felt your absence for so long and when I finally got to come back, I couldn't believe my good fortune, the grace that gives me a backstage pass to your lives. I mean, y'all. I get to be on the receiving end of all that you are, and that's wild to me. Just wild that this collar and these robes lead me into your hearts, too. You know, it's a lovely thing being loved and loving, too, but it's a hard ask and not for the reasons you might think. We all know sometimes some people are hard to love. Whatever, that's life. But it's a hard ask to love because every last one of us will suffer because we love. One day, or many, someone we love will die, and because we loved, we will hurt. That's one of the lessons of Holy Week.

There's an old saying that the heart has reason for which reason knows nothing. If it were up to reason, we could weigh out the pros and cons of opening ourselves up and then decide if the impending pain would be worth it. But thank God, love doesn't work like that. We don't choose our loves. Once we do love, we choose what to do with it, but we don't choose to love in the first place. Actually, I kind of think about faith in the same way. I don't go in for faith because it's a reasonable thing to do. I don't weigh the pros and cons and then decide to believe in God. Which is funny, 'cause so many theological arguments come at it from that angle. Actually, I think like love, faith has reason for which reason knows nothing. I know it's not a *reasonable* thing to believe in God, but I just can't help it.

By the way, I'm not saying there's no place for reason here, not at all. It's just that reason doesn't have the only claim on us. There's dignity to emotions, too, like faith, love and compassion. And they don't always make sense. I've been looking for answers to the whys and hows of humankind for a long time, even cussed at my priest as a teenager too big for my britches. I've lived in a monastery, tried out practices of different world religions, probably mistaken an idea here and there, and almost certainly offended with my cavalier experiments in faith. And I haven't done this because I think it's the rational thing to do. I know it isn't, but just like how I fell in love with my wife, I didn't choose to believe. I just did, or at least, I suspected, and before that, I wondered. And then I chose what to do. I chose to return to the church I liked the most from my childhood. I chose to push beyond the easy answers and assumptions I thought I knew the answers to. I chose to read scripture and try to figure out what made it worthwhile. And eventually I even chose to make some commitments. And what I found was a wealth I had no idea faith was holding onto. There's thousands of years of other people coming at this stuff, brilliant minds tearing apart and reknitting religion. There's some mindless following in there, too, but there's way more examined faith than I ever expected to find. You name it, nearly anything you've heard people say about Christianity or religion or belief at all, I've been there. I've hated the church, I've had the teachings of the church held against me, I've been damned and spat on and singled out in sermons for my supposed dangerous ways. Trust me, if I'd had my druthers, I wouldn't be the kind of person to

land in a pulpit, and truthfully, it haunts my days knowing that I may someday hurt some already hurting soul just by virtue of representing this ancient institution.

But y'all, if there's nothing else we hear today, let it be this. The Church at its best is love. Fraternal, agape, peace-giving love, yes. But it's more layered, deeper, universal than that, and I'm not sure I have the words for it yet. I'm only just discovering that I have the heart for it. This reason-less love that I'm talking around really only opened up for me over the past week or two. It's a love that embraces far more than I ever imagined I was capable of doing. It's a love that sees a stranger on the sidewalk and cracks a smile like I've found an old friend. It's a love that hears a redwing blackbird and rejoices not just because they signal a change in the season but because, Oh my God, have you ever even seen a blackbird and heard their song?!? It's a love that aches when I break a piece of tall grass or leaps when my shovel dings hard against a rock.

I know, it sounds completely crazy, and I'm guessing a few of you are wondering what I got into before stepping into the pulpit. I heard a couple of really out there traveling preachers when I was growing up that'd gotten into the catnip, and I'm a little worried that I'm sounding the same. But I really do feel this change, and I think there's something about that growing, universal love, that radiating compassion, that connects me and us and all of Creation to each other and to God. And I think there might be something about the nearness of the grave that's cracked this open for me. My heart is raw and open, and while I'm grieving, maybe because I'm grieving, I'm receptive to this whole other frequency of loving. And that makes me wonder. I wonder if Mary Magdalene in her grief, the other Marys, the other disciples, I wonder if their grief broke something open in them, too. A receptivity that laid the foundation for the miraculous Resurrection they'd soon see, soon love, soon pull into their hearts.

The thing is, I also suspect there's something of a limited window for how long that extreme compassion remains accessible, that receptivity stays open. I suspect reason will take the wheel again soon, and I'll go back to grumbling over people and their people-ing and birds and their too-early chirping. Truth be told, I don't know if I have the energy to be this loving all the time. Maybe it's a mercy that this opened window'll close again. But I think this compassion flood, even after it disperses, I think it's going to sustain me for a mighty long time, and maybe by then Easter will swing around again and the window'll fly back open.

I don't know, that's a lot and a long way of getting around to saying that there's a real gift to being in this place with all y'all. I know we all come at church differently. I know a lot of us are hurting. I know a lot of us are asking questions. And I know a lot of us are wondering if it's even worth sitting through another service. I can't answer those questions for you, but I'm so grateful you chose to come here to look for the answers. Whether that was forty years ago or a couple minutes after we got rolling today. As unreasonable as it may sound, I'm so grateful that this window's open at just the right time to love you. I didn't choose it, I suspect you didn't either, it's just there. The love of God interjecting against all the reasons not to. But that's Easter. Unreasonable, raw, and full of love.