

February 20, 2022

Sermon at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church

Let me begin with a blessing:

The world now is too dangerous, and too beautiful for anything but love.

May your eyes be so blessed you see God in everyone.

Your ears, so you hear the cry of the poor.

May your hands be so blessed that everything you touch is a sacrament.

Your lips, so you speak nothing but the truth with love.

May your feet be so blessed you run to those who need you.

And may your heart be so opened, so set on fire, that your love, YOUR love, changes everything.

February is a month filled with valentines and presidents and Black History. We are still in the season of Epiphany, of manifestation, learning, awakening to new ideas. And I am thinking today of my brother, T. Geoff, whose birthday is tomorrow. He would be 74 years old. T. Geoff lived a challenging life and he died at the age of 45. When I spoke at his funeral, I said that he worked hard every day. He also loved hard, and never said a word – at least I never heard him say a word – about how it was to be hospitalized, stigmatized, and drugged as a mental patient in the early days of psychotropic medicine. I dedicate these words today to T. Geoff who, despite his challenges, was generous to his family and to his neighbors.

At St. Thomas's I work with the children, teaching Sunday School, and I have made our primary theme the Golden Rule. It is in our scripture today, in Luke's Gospel: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." In the piece we read today, known as "The Sermon on the Plain,"

Jesus is very **plain**-spoken and direct, and inclusive. We are supposed to love everyone. *Love my enemy? Forgive? Love those who harm me?*

Love and forgiveness are together in this Gospel, as they are in The Lord's Prayer and in many other scriptural verses, even in Genesis. The word "forgiveness" is not part of today's first lesson, but what else can we call Joseph's offer to his brothers, the ones who had sold him into slavery in Egypt? "And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them."

Heeding God's words can be challenging – but also healing. Let me tell you how I see this.

This February, Black History Month, I have been posting images on Facebook, along with the words, "Representation Matters." I have shared children's picture books, in which the illustrations are multicultural and inclusive. Not only do Black children need to see themselves in story books, but we ALL need to see these images. Let's imprint **our** brains with the full range of humanity.

For example, I shared a book written by Ilene Cooper and illustrated by Gabi Swiatkowska, "The Golden Rule." In the book, a grandfather teaches his grandson about the Golden Rule. The grandfather has a beard and a black hat; he is an Orthodox Jew. Together they look at examples from many religions – Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Native American. They talk about how wonderful it would be if everyone followed this rule. The little boy says, "Maybe there wouldn't be wars."

As the book ends, the grandfather says, "But you can't make everyone in the world practice the Golden Rule. There is only one person you can ask to do that."

"Me?" asks the little boy.

"You. It begins with you," responds the grandfather.

Another book I shared this month was “I Am Loved,” by the poet Nikki Giovanni, illustrated by Ashley Bryan. In one of the poems, Giovanni writes, “I am you and you are me and that’s how life goes on.” We can begin **there**, with the idea that there is no “other.” So that when Jesus says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” we can ponder the possibility that our neighbor IS our self.

When Bishop Desmond Tutu died at the end of December, I decided I wanted to study more about him, and to share his life and his message with the Sunday School class. For myself, I had been meaning to learn more about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a concept of restorative justice that fascinates me. In learning more about Desmond Tutu, I came across a word that was new to me: UBUNTU. It’s a word, both Zulu and Xhosa is origin, which means, “I am because we are.” All our actions have an impact on others and on society. It means we are here on earth in **relationship** with one another.

Bishop Tutu said, “My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.”

He brought this concept to life as he worked to move South Africa away from the terrible years of Apartheid. He then led the commission that offered amnesty to perpetrators of violence in an intricate process of truth-telling and mutual respect.

All of this leads us to the understanding that we are in this world together. When we say in our Prayers of the People, “lead us to care for this fragile earth, our island home,” I often call to mind the image of our planet photographed by the Apollo astronauts. We are a fragile people on this small rock. We can apply these ideas to understanding racial reconciliation.

You have surely heard in the media about Critical Race Theory. I’d like to give you an example of what it is, and why it is powerful. In a book

called “Freedom Over Me,” author and illustrator, Ashley Bryan builds a story on an historical record. The history is an 1828 appraisal of the assets held by a widow, Mary Fairchild, which includes a list of eleven slaves along with the cattle, horse, hogs, and cotton.

The author, in his book, which is meant for children, creates complex identities and dreams for each of these people. Here is an example from a chapter about “Betty:”

My Yoruba name, Temitope, means, “Thanks to God.”

As I work gardening for owners, I am thinking if I were free, I would acquire my own acres of land.

I would hire men and women from cities and farms to work and study the land with me.

Earnings from our labor would benefit all of us, the workers.

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We know that we are not slaves. We are of the human family. We respect life on earth.

We would share with all the fruits of our labor.

Our cultivation of the land is our gift of thanks, our praise song to Mother Earth.

In these lines, and on all the pages of the book, people who were enslaved become people we know. How can we learn about the individuals? In the phenomenal book and mini-series, “Roots,” by Alex Haley, the individual person – Kunte Kinte – becomes someone we can relate to, someone real. It’s not enough to look at a timeline in a history book. We who are human must see the soul of the victim in order to understand the level of cruelty involved.

During Black History Month, the highlighted individuals are usually people of achievement. I have often asked myself how incredibly brilliant George Washington Carver or Harriet Tubman or Frederick

Douglass must have been. What if we also asked ourselves about those who were not gifted with that intelligence, that drive? Ordinary people, like us. What about people like the enslaved woman, “Betty”?

Historic records can tell us how many people were enslaved and what their monetary value might have been – but it takes a poet to make us see the humanity. And, once we can feel that human connection, we have to know that a terrible sin has been done. This is CRT, “Critical Race Theory.”

I had to start my study of forgiveness at home. Like too large a percentage of children in this country, I am the survivor of sexual abuse. And the abuser was my father. When a therapist raised the question of forgiveness with me, I could not even consider it. But, over time and with a lot of work -- in therapy, through reading, through conversations with friends and family, and through church – I have found peace. And that is what forgiveness is – not tolerance of behavior, but forgiveness of the person. Who was just a person – like me and like you.

Since I am by nature and experience a teacher, and a practical person, I cannot leave you with only inspiration and beautiful concepts. Suppose every one of us could find a way to imbed forgiveness into our daily lives -- at home, in school, or at work? With the Sunday School children, I often present scenarios, asking them questions such as *what might you do if a person called you a mean name or told other kids nasty things about you?* Adults can do this as well. Think about someone or something that has caused a rift between you and another person. And then try to apply this formula:

What does it mean to forgive someone? In its simplest terms, to forgive is to “surrender our right to get even.” Practically, this involves four promises:

- I will no longer dwell on this incident.
- I will not bring up this incident again or use it against you.
- I will not talk to others about this incident.
- I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our relationship. *

Thank you for listening. Remember the blessing I started with today, “And may your heart be so opened, so set on fire, that your love, YOUR love, changes everything.”

Later this morning we will sing the hymn, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.” As we do, I hope that you will take the words of this hymn into your hearts, “Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure unbounded love thou art; visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart.”

*Taken from [*Peace Catalysts: Resolving Conflict in Our Families, Organizations, and Communities*](#) by Rick Love Copyright (c) 2014 p.75 by Rick Love. Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com