

Scriptures:

1 John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

The Pain of Loving

It's Easter, so we can resonate quickly and happily with Psalm 98's images: we sing a new song, for God "has done marvelous things." The celebration of Easter for me has less to do with thanking God for Jesus' death that makes it so we get to go to heaven now. It has a whole lot more to do with what Jesus does in the face of intense rejection and criticism. As the Psalm says, "He has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations." And so we make a joyful noise. James Howell wrote "Two warnings. I worry that preaching Psalm 98 in light of Easter will over-baptize the thing and we'll miss out on original context. The Israelites, knowing nothing of Easter, sang this lustily and praised God for various victories, largely national in character. Which dovetails into the second worry: it's not just Easter that we praise God for. The whole divine dispensation, from creation onward, elicits our praise."¹

"Christian Wiman, narrating his deepening struggles and understandings of God in the face of cancer and depression (in *My Bright Abyss*), tells us, "I am a Christian not because of the resurrection. I am a Christian because of that moment on the cross when Jesus, drinking the very dregs of human bitterness, cries out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? The point is that God is with us, not beyond us, in our suffering."²

Last week I was blessed to be able to attend the "Inhabit Conference" in Seattle, Washington. It was part of the year long course I am doing on "Leadership in the New Parish" with the Parish Collective. Being that I am taking a class that included this conference on the morning the conference began I had already had two days to start soaking things up. Our first evening was spent catching up with classmates (we are a small collective of 10 students and we have gotten to know one another pretty well after few months of together telling our Stories). The second day I was blessed to listen to Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson in a session on "Refounding God's People." Alan is a prophet in our time, he is one of the founders of the missional movement in churches world wide. I have spent a lot of time listening and reading his work and I just happened to room and board with him and his wife Jane for several years while I did my Masters degrees. He stated in his introduction "What we call the "missional" conversation has characterized the Euro-tribal churches of North America for over twenty years. Based on the missiological and theological work of Lesslie Newbigin, the missional movement sought to discover what it mean to be a missional church. In so doing the language of missional became an adjectival modifier of church. The result has been that the missional conversation has

¹ <http://www.ministrymatters.com/preach/entry/8967/weekly-preaching-may-6-2018>

² IBID

become a conversation about the church rather than about the nature of God's mission in the dramatically changing contexts of the late modern West. The Euro-tribal churches are in crises across the West and the missional conversation has not been able to address the underlying malaise of these churches. This forum invited participants into a dialogue about addressing these challenges beyond methods of fixing or reformatting. It proposes that a Gospel-shaped engagement calls for practices for a refounding of God's people in a radically changing West." Now... that might all sound a bit boring to you but not me. I soaked up every moment while we discussed how do we become a church for our neighbourhoods and our communities, how do we truly get reconnected and live out God's mission of love and grace especially in cascadia where people pride themselves in the fact that they do not have religious affiliations. The hardest part of that is I understand why, because when the church became about a mission for itself rather than a place where people gathered to learn God's mission and then build a loving, life-giving community out of it, we lost our way.

Macky came along with me to see what has been firing me up and do some real journeying with me through this conference. He arrived late Thursday night and Friday morning we were standing in line at registration. I was in a place of nervous excitement for I had already been experiencing God's love through people, presence, practice and place and I was excited to have Macky feel the blessing as well. We stood in line to register. I was busy introducing Macky to all my new friends when I got a text message from Kayla that said "you may have heard but just in case - Bert passed away this morning" ...boom.

Macky had drifted off down the line in a conversation with some folks and all I could do was stand there stunned and look for my person because from the day we heard Bert's diagnosis we recommitted to cherish every moment we have together because we have been reminded that we don't dictate the timing of life and death.

And so I registered and then sent Macky into the conference alone and went into the chapel to call Diane. I had seen Bert on Tuesday afternoon and I had told Diane I was heading to Seattle first thing in the morning and so she hadn't wanted to bother me. (please know if any of you are ever in any kind of life and death real situation I wouldn't consider it a bother if you called night or day). Diane and I talked and cried and even cursed a little and I tried to assure her that we would all be there for her knowing full well that likely gave little comfort but it was all I had in the moment.

I tell you this story because it is a reminder of how the joys and fullness of life and the sorrows, trials and tragedies are always intertwined. And so when the scriptures call us to praise and thanksgiving be reminded that the people these were written by and for were in the midst of real life too. The thanksgiving in these scriptures reminds us we are not alone. Some how cherishing the gifts that have been given even in the midst gives us strength and abundance and even joy. The psalmist says The Lord is our Shepherd we will not go it alone even in the valley of death God is with us. Diane shared seeing that in the moment that Bert passed with such peace, even a smile appeared and it seemed every wrinkle on his face faded away.

Last week at the Inhabit conference we listened to a lot of powerful stories of people and churches and communities that are doing radical things in the midst of poverty, racism, consumerism and more. But one of the stories that has stuck with me the most was a story of a young woman a pastor met in prison. A beautiful girl who had a very hard life and when her

Grandmother died she lost her support system and she turned to despair, and depression and eventually cocaine and she became addicted and started falling into crime and eventually she landed in jail. She was a good person, life just got too hard. It does sometimes doesn't it.

This pastor told this life-giving story of how she had journeyed with her struggling friend and that she was now sober two and a half years and she has her daughter back, and she is part of her church community and she even made it through her mothers death six months ago. We were all overjoyed and happy as she shared her petcha chucha (a short talk with slide and photos most of the speakers were asked to do). However at the end of her petcha chucha she didn't quickly leave the stage like every one else. She paused and then she said. That is the film and the story I prepared for you on Wednesday night after I arrived here on Thursday evening I received a phone call that Jessica³ had relapsed and was in a bad way. A room full of pastors and leaders gasped, teared up and nodded as she said... and the journey of love continues. See God is with us in the joy and the celebrations in the sadness, the muck and the sorrow.

When we read the scriptures and when we hear the stories of being commanded to love one another we don't really like the idea of being commanded to do anything and yet perhaps it needs to be said that strongly because it is hard. It is so easy for us to look the other way - to love metaphorically and just kind of be nice as often as possible but that is not what we are called to.

"We are to love, but not just having warm, loving feelings or even actions we regard as loving. We are to love as Christ loved us; we measure and shape our love after the kind of love Christ had for us, for lepers, for outcasts, for Mary, for the disciples, even for Judas and Pilate. Jean Vanier can help: "To love people as Jesus loves them is to wash their feet, to serve them in humility; it is to help them rise up in truth and love. To love is to lay down one's life for others, to place their interests before our own. It is to reveal to them that they are loved by Jesus."

Jesus clarifies that this is his whole point: "that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete." It's not that God makes me joyful. Rather, Jesus' joy inhabits us; we feed off his joy as he is with us and in us."⁴

In the last months I have learned that truly loving your neighbour is wonderful and exhausting, life-giving and messy but if I am truly going to follow the one of love, the one who shares abundant life there is no other way. I am blessed so that I may be a blessing to others. Thanks be to God.

Amen

³ not her real name

⁴ <http://www.ministrymatters.com/preach/entry/8967/weekly-preaching-may-6-2018>