

Love in Hard Times

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Scripture Reading: John 13:31-35

I'm so glad to be here today. I was so glad for the invitation from Sharlande to speak from this pulpit, which I'm just keeping warm until our Senior Pastor, Kyndall Rothaus, returns. I'm glad to have the opportunity to share with you some thoughts and words, but first I need your help. Turn to the person next to you and say to them, "Congratulations! You made it to church."

Congregation comes alive

Amen. Now, y'all just engaged in some low-key evangelicalism for the liturgically-minded Baptist. As Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, "Evangelism is telling somebody something good." And you just did that.

So, why am I up here? What are my credentials? I have not studied the Scriptures in an academic context. I'm not a religious studies scholar. I am not a student of Greek or Hebrew. But I am a sinner saved by grace. I was baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And I was sealed at my baptism by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. So those are my credentials.

My professional work is that I'm an English professor at Baylor. My particular areas of study is rhetoric. I have a dear friend named Trish Roberts-Miller who is a professor of rhetoric at UT-Austin, down the road from here—a road that just got a little harder to travel over the last few weeks as they're working on 35. But Trish, when she's asked what it means to study rhetoric, she makes the comment, "I study train wrecks in public deliberation." So when things have gone wrong.

Now, when I hear that instruction from her, I often think about a hymn or an old song that tells of a train—the train that will not be wrecked—and that is the Jesus train.

Sung: People get ready. There's a train a-comin. You don't need no ticket. You just get on board. You don't need no ticket. You just thank the Lord.

That's a train that won't be wrecked. You just get on board. Jesus in the train in which we live and move and have our being, and He moves us, and we move by His power. It's not our own power, but the power of the Gospel that sends us forth, that moves us and will not be stopped.

Now, when I think about this particular Gospel and how to talk about it, I approach it—surprise, surprise—from a literary perspective, and what I mean I think about what comes immediately before and immediately after.

So, immediately before this scene, Jesus has revealed who is going to betray Him, and it is Judas. He has dipped the bread in the wine and handed it to Judas. As the Scripture says, "He went out into the night." And that's where our Gospel reading picks up. Given what's just happened, you might think—well, Jesus has just identified His betrayer, He has let folks know what's gonna happen—and you might think we're going to have some Judas Hate Time. We're going to have some criticism, some unkindness, some snark, some shade. But no. No, Jesus doesn't stop to engage in criticism.

Jesus moves forward. He gives instruction. He tells us what we are to do now and in the days to come. He says, “You are to love one another.”

What happens immediately after this Gospel reading? Peter—good old Peter—Peter is told by Jesus, “You will deny me three times.” So it’s not just those who were unfaithful who betrayed Jesus, it’s those who are faithful to the end, but who stumble and fall along the way. But Jesus does not dwell on Peter’s failing. He just let you know it’s gonna happen. But you can get back on board the train by loving one another.

Now, Peter in the Acts portion that’s part of the lectionary sequence of Scripture readings, there is a story for today where Peter preaches a sermon that tells of a grand vision he saw, and he talks about how we should let nothing the Lord has made be called unclean. He talks about how divisions will go away, divisions will fall because we are called by a Lord who makes us bigger and better and greater than we could ever be on our own.

But even this Peter, he stumbles and falls. There’s an old song that says, “Maybe you can’t preach like Peter, and if you can’t pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus who came to save us all.” So even as we stumble and fall, even as we faithful—all faithful—will stumble and fall, there is a way forward. And that is to get back on board the Jesus train and love one another.

The way of love is hard, and it was made for hard times. When Jesus gave this instruction, He was in the midst of a betrayal that was ongoing. This wasn’t easy. This wasn’t easy times. It was hard times, but still He said love one another.

Now, Jesus calls it a new commandment, but I’m sure that there are some Older Testament scholars here who might think, “This sounds really familiar. In fact, it might not be so new. It might be very old.” It might be Jesus reiterating, restating, amplifying a message from the Older Testament, from Leviticus, from other places that speak of loving your neighbor as yourself. There’s sort of a theme here that runs throughout the whole of the Gospel, the whole of Scripture.

I didn’t grow up in church. The earliest point of contact with church that I remember came when I was four years old through a program called “Mother’s Day Out” held at First Baptist Church in Colorado City, Texas at 301 Chestnut Street. Such a program title leveraged both a gender ideology that configured childcare as “women’s work” and the material reality that much caring labor is done by women on whom gendered work expectations are placed. Setting aside the fact that Mama and Daddy were both out working every day, I will simply say that the program provided a space for little ones like me to play. In February 1990, the group I was part of wrote a Presidents’ Day letter to George H. W. Bush. Each of us four- and five-year-olds contributed a question, and a local newspaper, the *Big Spring Herald*, published our listicle epistle.

The topics ranged broadly: Bush’s church attendance, belief in God, how he liked his job, the quality of his government housing. Out of fourteen questions, eight related to the topic of children—five asking about Bush’s own children. However, there were three in our bunch who had a clear sense of social concern in connection with children:

What about homeless kids? . . .

Why do kids sleep on the street? . . .

What about poor children, crying children, if one of them are hurt, where do they go?

I'm pretty sure these questions came from the much more mature five-year olds—that extra year makes all the difference. My question would seem less about politics or religion, and more about aesthetics: “Mr. President, do you like flowers?” Given that my parents were not fans of the Bush administration, I hoped to build on some potential point of connection between my family and him. My maternal grandmother was an extraordinary gardener who could always grow the most gorgeous flowers; my maternal grandfather was an accomplished nature photographer who could capture the most exquisite flower pictures. They both dedicated themselves to cultivating, capturing, and sharing beauty—flowers in particular. So I just knew that if President Bush liked flowers, we could all find a way forward.

In the intervening three decades since 1990, my faith in flowers has been surely and sorely tested. I find myself thinking of the Pete Seeger song:

“Where have all the flowers gone?
Long time ago
Where have all the flowers gone?
Girls have picked them every one
When will they ever learn?...
Where have all the graveyards gone?
Covered with flowers every one
When will we ever learn?”

But maybe it's just winter. Maybe when it seems like there are no flowers, maybe it's just time for seeds to gather their strength and power. Jim talked to us last week about how important and beautiful things can happen in wintertime. Isn't that right, Jim?

Beautiful and important things can happen in the winter—when maybe we can't see the flowers. There's a beautiful Easter hymn that speaks of:

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
Jesus' touch can call us back to life again,
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

Oh, that Jesus love. But maybe, maybe you cannot see the flowers, and maybe you don't feel like the train is moving.

I need you to do something else for me—need your help again. If you've got 'em, look at your shoes. Look at your shoes, if you've got 'em. Maybe they're shiny, maybe they're scuffed up, maybe they've got holes in the soles that mirror the hole you sometimes feel in your own soul, maybe they're sandals, maybe they're high heels. Whatever kind of shoes you're wearing, look at 'em for a second. Now, maybe you can't feel the train moving, maybe you can't see the flowers growing, but you've got shoes here in this world right now, and...

Sung: You've got shoes in-a that kingdom. Ain't that good news?

It is good news when John in his Gospel today talks about glorification. Glorification in John always points toward and is in anticipation of the cross. The cross is the way, the symbol, the sign that points to the way of love, the hard way of love. And you might be thinking right now, “Oh Lawd not another white man preaching about how our sweet by-and-by in Heaven justifies and accommodates us to pain and suffering in this world right now, in the here and now.

No, no, no, no. This is not about your reward in the hereafter—although that is coming, don’t get me wrong. All of you, I’m sure, have many stars in your crown. I have a diadem, I’m sure.

This message is for you. It’s not about in the hereafter, but in the here-and-now. This message is for those of you gathered here at Lake Shore Baptist Church at 5801 Bishop Drive on this May 19, 2019. And that message is that the way of love, the way of the cross is a way that breaks down barriers, erases purity codes that divide, removes customs that shore up the power of some, and casts away conventions keep others out.

The way of love is hard, but it is good. And the Lord is faithful. The Way of the cross, the way of love is for PhDs and No Degrees, it’s for MAs and castaways—whether you’ve got an MDiv or Nothing Left to Give (and talk to some folks in ministry, those are not mutually exclusive).

The way of love is for all of us. It’s hard. It’s not about gentility—I know in the South we’re good on gentility, we’re good on politeness. That’s not the same as love. But it is hard and it is good.

The late peace activist Daniel Berrigan spoke about how, “The antidote to hopelessness is doing hopeful things.” Right here, right now, in this place, in this space, I am doing the most hopeful thing I believe I can do. And that is sharing with you the love of God in Jesus Christ. The way of love is hopeful.

My dear friend Debbie Leighton, three years ago, she was very suddenly preparing to die. She got very sick, and she got on hospice care very quickly after it was clear she didn’t have a long. And she was meeting with the priest who would deliver her funeral sermon. She told him something that has stayed with me and never left. She said, “Don’t make a big deal about me. Just tell them the love of Jesus.” Just tell them the love of Jesus. Don’t make a big deal about me.

I do believe that our work as Gospel ministers is important. The life of each person it is important. Our presence in this place, in this world, is important. And we have serious work to do. We should take the work, call, and the ministry seriously, but never take ourselves too seriously.

Like Debbie said, “Just tell them the love of Jesus.” ‘Cause if you cannot preach like Peter, and you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus who came to save us all.”

And if you’ve got that hole in your soul that you feel sometimes, just remember:

All singing: There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.”

Y’all are so good at that. God bless you and thank you.