



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## The Return of Love

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 20, 2022*

*The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany*

*Based on Genesis 45:3-11, 15; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38*

I'm convinced most priests fall into one of two camps: wedding priests or funeral priests. I'm an unabashed wedding priest. God is love, so when we love, we know God. Slam dunk. Enough said. I usually look at friends who are funeral priests like they're the grownup version of the goth poetry kids who wore black head to toe in high school and listened to Pink Floyd on loop.

Well as many of you know, my mother, Phyllis Spellers, died suddenly on Wednesday, January 12, at her home in Kentucky. Being on this grief journey now, I think I'm switching teams.

Christianity is a faith shaped around the life and death of God among us. Every single one of us has experienced or will experience the death of someone precious to us. Every single one of us will eventually die, and that loss will, for a time, tear someone else's world to pieces. Can we talk about it?

Jesus frames most every one of his teachings not simply as advice for living well, but the key to eternal life. And then he dies on a cross and rises to new life, to prove he meant it all. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 speaks at length about the fate of the dead and the promise of resurrection into a different form, like seeds that die only to become a flower. In the Creed we declare our belief in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. If you took death and resurrection out of our liturgies, you would lose a huge chunk of the Prayer Book.

Some folks have gotten this all along. One of those funeral priest friends wrote to tell me: "This is holy time. When I lost my parent, felt like the veil between heaven and earth split open, and I was exposed with this view straight to the divine." Facing into death changes the way you see the world, faith, and life. Not just for me, but for all of us. Certainly changes the way I read today's gospel.

If there were a greatest hits of the Bible, and there really should be, Luke 6:27-38 would be at the top:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you ...

Do unto others as you would have them do to you ...

Be merciful as your heavenly father is merciful ...

Do not judge and you will not be judged ...

Forgive and you will be forgiven ...

Give and it will be given to you ...

Do all these things, and your reward will be great.

You will be known as children of the Most High.

People who know nothing of Christianity can quote lines from this passage. I can see why. Don't we all want love, fairness, mercy, forgiveness? There's also something fundamental here about the makeup of the universe, especially in the final lines. I had never noticed them much before; they're all I can see now: "A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

Call it karma. Call it logic. Call it pure pragmatism. What you put into the world will eventually come back to you. If you only hurt others and withhold forgiveness, others will target you and refuse forgiveness when you need it most. If you exude negativism and bitterness, the world will take on a brittle cast and consistently disappoint you.

But if you love, when you have no reason to love; if you encounter people who declare you're the enemy, and you choose to refuse to return their hate with more your own; if you dig deep and draw on the power and abiding hope of the Lord that is in you, even when circumstances are dire and help is nowhere in sight: these surprising rays of light show up, and you discover you are resilient beyond your imagining.

And others around you become more lively and resilient and loving, too. You will not avoid pain. People will not instantly fall in love with you. There may be sparks of light, but don't expect sunshine and rainbows.

AND you WILL be truly a child of the Most High, living the way of Jesus, filled with the power and grace of God. And in this life or the next, you will have your reward. You will live forever as love.

Oh yes, "The measure you give will be the measure you receive." Push out love, and love will return.

I have discovered the truth of Jesus' words over the last month, since my mother died. Children think they know their parents, and to some degree, we do. As the daughter of a single mom who never remarried, I had an especially close bond with my mom. I also have no children of my own and only married about a year ago. So we were each other's person for most of my 50 years on this planet.

So yes, I knew Mom was awesome. I loved (and always will love) her. I also admired her: she never graduated from college, but she filled our house with books, and she bequeathed to me her adoration for the written word. She worked primarily admin jobs her whole career and took on second jobs at grocery stores, customer call-in centers, wherever she could.

That woman worked so hard for so little financial reward, but you didn't hear her complain. The opposite! She had a smile that lit up everyone and everything around her.

I knew all that. But I did not know *this*. I did not know until she died just how much love she had pushed out into this world. I know now, because I have seen waves and waves of love flooding back. And it's like she is here in a whole new way, a way that never dies.

Every moment since her death, I have seen that love. People at the door, people making calls, people sending cards. Not just to pay respects, but with hearts full of love and grief I simply did not expect. One card arrived here in NY. I didn't know the sender from Adam, though she wrote, "Your mother was like a sister to me and I loved her." Wow.

Cousins keep coming to me, almost like the confessional. "Your mom was a second mother to me." "Your mother was my daughter's other grandmother."

I've heard about how she stepped in to help to raise the autistic child of one of my cousins. When seemingly no one else could connect with Alissa, my mom got through. She sat with patience, got Alissa writing and talking in ways even her teachers could not. Mom beheld her with love, and that girl—now 17 years old—she loved, and I am sure will always love, my mother in return.

People all over our hometown of Frankfort, Kentucky, have told me stories of how, when they were struggling financially, my mom came up with odd jobs they could do for a little cash. She didn't have money to spare. But what she had, she was so ready to give away.

And over the last month, it has flooded back. All that love she put into the world, I can feel the fullness of love returning, and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that love has followed her into a whole other form of life. Like a seed cracked open in the ground that rises into green shoots, like a caterpillar reborn as butterfly, like the broken body of Jesus that we can now hold in our own hands and take into our own bodies.

Here's the truth: I don't know that I really believed in heaven and a life after death, until now. Until I saw all that love—God's love which is her love which is our love—all rising up to carry Mom to her eternal home. Until I felt that love, her spirit, dwelling here invisibly yet more powerfully.

So, yes, Jesus and Mama, as usual you're both still right. And I find I am grateful and excited to live—I hope we as Christian community help each other to live—as if sending out love is the thing that matters most. As if we trust beyond doubt that *that* love will grow and return—that we will grow and be reborn—like a cup filled to the measure with love and overflowing forever and ever and ever.

Belief like this changes how we move through life. It changes how we welcome death. It has changed me, and it changes everything. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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