



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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We Cannot NOT Love

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 29, 2022

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

Based on Acts 16:16-34; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

Opening Prayer/Song:

*O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lowly exile here
Until the son of God appear.
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel
Shall come to thee O Israel.*

Our tears were not even dry yet. Ten dead in Buffalo, gunned down by a young man determined to make sure white people are never replaced by Black or brown or Jewish people. It was surreal and it was a horror, and—in some ways—it was another day in America.

We hadn't even processed it yet when the news came in. Twelve elementary school children dead. No, make that 14 children and 2 teachers. No, 17 children and 2 teachers and a wounded grandmother. Now 19 children, 2 teachers, a wounded grandmother and the husband of a teacher who died of a heart attack the day after his wife was murdered.

When the news came in, I was in the midst of leading a 3-day retreat for pastors, priests and guides from many Christian traditions. Our leadership team quickly regrouped. We opened space for people to call out their prayers. They responded with moaning and wailing. People with children wept for their own little ones. People who have no children wept for the children and parents we love, and for our nation and its deep brokenness.

At some point, spontaneous cries just burst forth. One guy just howled, guttural belly yells. Like captain cave man. Others called out: "Why Lord? How long, Lord? We need you. Come Lord Jesus." We didn't know who else to call on. We all called on Jesus.

In that moment, I was reminded in a way that I NEVER am of Revelation. It was the passage we just heard. Allow me to raise it up once again:

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come."
And let everyone who hears say, "Come."
And let everyone who is thirsty come.
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.
The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Revelation 22)

The Aramaic word for this cry is *Maranatha*. “O Lord Come!” Among the early Christians who were persecuted for proclaiming Jesus, the followers of the Way would secretly greet each other with this word: “*Maranatha*.”

It was their way of saying that, no matter what happened, no matter what they faced—loss of livelihood or reputation, alienation from friends and family, even torture and violent death—come what may, they placed all their present and future hope in God. They believed God’s love could transform this world. And even if they died, they would die loving, and that love would never ever be in vain.

In this morning’s gospel, Jesus confirms that promise. Every word he has preached, every step he has taken, it’s all contributed to one purpose: “so that the love with which you [God] have loved me may be in them, and I in them, that they may all be one.” (John 17)

Jesus is a member of the original community of love, the Trinity: Creator, Christ and Spirit, three in one, one in three. Through Jesus, our Trinitarian God extends a hand to all of humanity, inviting us to enter into their love, to be like them: a body defined by love. Love for one another. Love for the world. That’s God’s dream for God’s people. That’s the mission of the church. To be a body of love, like the God whose love we bear.

This love that God has poured into us through Jesus is a powerful love. It’s not just acts of kindness and service. It’s not just love for other followers of Jesus. This love sacrifices, challenges, extends beyond itself, transforms, heals. This love—God’s love working in us—can change everything.

But can it change THIS world? I want to know. If we just pray hard enough, will there never be another mass shooting, will white supremacy and human trafficking and wars just end? Will prayer prevent the horrific murder of the next George Floyd, whose death anniversary we marked quietly one day after the shootings in Uvalde?

From all that I can see ... the answer is no. Because generations have prayed and labored, and evil marches on. Our God is not the God of Psalm 97:

The fire goes before him and burns up his enemies on every side.
His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees it and is afraid.
Mountains melt like wax at the presence of the LORD.

I do not see that dramatic intervention on the horizon. I do not see evil quaking in its boots. If anything, I am amazed at how brazenly evil flies in the face of God. I feel angry, powerless, humbled and even a little naive, for expecting more.

So what can God do? What can we do, as extensions of the loving body of God? As I have prayed with this question—and haven’t we all?—I have felt the call to advocate more fiercely for common sense gun safety, for voting rights, for mental health access, for policing reforms, for dismantling racism and resisting the reign of white supremacy.

Those strategies will make a difference. Public policy and action make a difference. And, beneath and around all those strategies, I hear a deeper call, more insistent than ever: Love. Love more. It does not matter if you are part of the church, part of the body of Christ. But especially if you are: Just love. Love more.

Maybe our prayer and loving action will not miraculously stop the spread of hate. But we can affect the cosmic balance. If the pain is this bad, if hate is this virulent, then we cry *Maranatha* even louder, and we love that much harder. That's how Jesus comes.

It's not that I believe our prayer will somehow control others. We pray to God, but God is not a judge whose opinion can be swayed by our arguments. And even if we did convince God, thanks to free will, God doesn't control human beings like puppets on strings. So, no, we cannot control others.

But I can control me. When the force of hate, pain and evil swirl all around, I can choose not to feed them, but instead to join up with the force of love. Love harder. Love desperately. Love ferociously. Love as if lives depend on your loving. And if enough of us are doing that, in the face of Ukraine and Uvalde and Buffalo, then we will not have lived or loved in vain.

Even as the suffering continues, there will be powerful bursts of love. Even when a child dies, she will feel the strong hand of her teacher. Even when a knee or chokehold squeezes the life out of a man, he will hear his mother calling him home. And maybe when the oppressor sees the force of that love, he will pause, just a moment. And his deadened heart might stutter back to life.

And so we meet the titanic powers of death and despair with the power of love. The alternative—bowing in defeat, bowing to fear, going numb—is not an option. Lift your heads back up and love with your last breath.

Last week, Bishop Mary Glasspool offered a blessing upon us, based on the prayer of William Sloane Coffin. She sent us with these words:

May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short;
grace to risk something big for something good;
grace to remember that the world
is too dangerous for anything but truth
and too small for anything but love.

That is my prayer, my mantra, for us in this time. In a world this dangerous, we cannot NOT love. It's our only real choice. The world is so small, the shockwaves of hate buffet us powerfully on all sides. You cannot sleep through it. Do not resign yourself to it. I pray you will not join up with it.

Keep crying out: *Maranatha!* Come Lord Jesus. And by the power of the spirit, keep loving. When we love, Jesus comes. When we love, he is here. This is how Jesus comes.

Amen.

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