

Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do...

The people, having fled Egypt, escaped through the Red Sea, traveled the wilderness of Mt. Sinai and now camped at its base, have heard the words God gave to Moses. And they respond: "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do."

If you've read at all beyond Exodus chapter 19, you might have heard these words with a sad smile: This response of the people is not the way the story goes. According to Numbers, the book that chronicles their wandering in the wilderness, the people have complained, they have accused God, they have suffered since Egypt but have made it hard on Moses and hard on God. And here at the base of the mountain, we learn a few chapters later while Moses is up top receiving the 10 Commandments, they get anxious and cast an image of a calf - their new God.

Keep my covenant, God tells Moses to tell them, and you shall be my treasured possession - a priestly kingdom, a holy people. The people's acclamation of obedience and their utter failure to live up to it is not the center of the story for me. The center for me comes in the words God speaks to Moses first - **You have seen what I did for you, "how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself."** That hasn't changed and that doesn't change. These are what God has done and continues to do for God's people. God's promise is always more dependable than our own. "As the psalmist says, "God is our maker to whom we belong... whose steadfast love is everlasting... whose faithfulness endures from age to age."

Still, those aspirational words sting, because in them are the seeds of the world we now live in. More aspiration than follow through. Blindness to self and denial of the truth of who and how we are. This is what leads to war, climate change, radical social division, economic inequality, global pandemics, mass shootings and mass denial. Harassed and helpless are the people, sheep without a shepherd.

And yet, this is the story we live in: Our failures and brokenness, God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

Our reading from Romans puts some flesh on the story but it's the same story. We have peace with God because God has brought us to Godself through Jesus - the revelation of God's love for God's people; God's steadfast, embodied commitment to God's people even unto death. "Christ died for us," Paul writes "while we were still weak... still sinners." God brought the Israelites to Godself long before they pledged obedience, aspirational though it was. God likely heard that aspiration, but held them still. This is the grace in which we stand, the gift that we did not earn and could never.

But our gospel story today gives us another element of that story. Jesus looks out on the people he sees, to whom he is proclaiming the good news. “When he saw the crowds,” we read “he had compassion for them.” “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few...” he tells the disciples. So he summons them, calls them closer. And having given them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness, he sends them out. “Proclaim the good news,” he tells them: “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.”

We too are disciples? Do we too have a mission? We do. It is the one shared by all disciples of Christ. But truly, what is that mission?

I believe that mission is love.

But stop - I imagine you're doing one of two things: You're either cringing at “love is the answer,” or you're exhaling in relief, settling in for a nice unchallenging message from Pastor Ben. You both have ‘love’ wrong, just as wrong as I did until recently.

Love as a flood of emotion is one kind of love, but there is another kind of love. It's a love with teeth. I read about it in a book called *See No Stranger*, by a Sikh American woman named Valarie Kaur. Its subtitle is *A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*. From the introduction;

**'Love' is more than a feeling. Love is a form of *sweet labor*: fierce, bloody, imperfect, and life-giving - a choice we make over and over again.** If love is sweet labor, love can be taught, modeled, and practiced. This labor engages *all* our emotions. Joy is the gift of love. Grief is the price of love. Anger protects that which is loved. And when we think we have reached our limit, wonder is the act that returns us to love.

This sweet labor is what she calls the 'love ethic.' A type of love that is

the choice to enter into wonder and labor for *others*, for our *opponents*, and for *ourselves* in order to transform the world around us. It is not a formal code or prescription but an **orientation** to life that is personal and political and rooted in joy... [It's a kind of love that] can only be practiced in community.

This is the sweet labor Jesus calls us to in our gospel today. As disciples, we are called to orient ourselves to this suffering world. Hear these actions expansively now: Cure the sick. Raise the dead. Cleanse the lepers. Cast out demons. This is the 'love ethic' Jesus modeled for the disciples, and models for us - the sweet labor of loving people fiercely, even for people that we don't feel deserve it. "You who received without payment," he says, "give without payment."

Do you hear the difficulty in that? I do. It's hard for me to orient myself to those who suffer without requiring something of them. Curing the sick implies a certain "start washing your hands so you don't get sick again!" Raising the dead makes me want to shake dead people, point them in the direction of life, and get them walking the path.

But the worst part of this 'love ethic' is that it's not only for others, or even our opponents: It's for ourselves too. That's really hard, to hold ourselves in the love and grace of God and stay there. It's really hard to be as broken as we are and receive what we've been given. It's really hard to be loved and know it's for nothing we did or didn't do, that we didn't earn it by the sweat of our brow - our "sweet labor." For are we not also standing at the foot of the mountain saying, "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do?" Are we not also guilty of betraying those aspirations around every bend?

But the sweet labor of God was to scoop us up on eagles' wings and bring us to God's very self. To free us from the bonds of slavery to sin and deliver us through the wilderness of our lives: That is the journey of the ancient Israelites, that is our journey through baptism - from death to life.

As incapable as we are of living up to our expectations of self and other, God's love (in all its ferocity, blood, perfect imperfection and Life) it has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that's been given to us. It is out of that deep well of love that we are able to labor sweetly at loving God, our neighbor and ourselves. It is in that grace by which we stand ' that the sick are healed, the dead raised, the lepers kissed clean, the demons run and the kingdom of God draws us near.

AMEN