

Sermon - Proper 12, Year A
Romans 8:26-39
7/30/23

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Human beings often have a difficult time imagining a gift that is unconditional. Perhaps this is a modern condition. Perhaps it has always been this way. A gift is something we experience as a transaction, almost as payment. You give me a gift for my birthday, and I will remember and give one to you on your birthday in return. Even our sense of our greatest gift – love – is tied to very human expectations. Perhaps we might say that we love our spouse or our child “unconditionally,” but there is an awareness – somewhere – that even this love could, God forbid, come to an end. Our lives on this side of heaven seem to be defined by limitations. Finitude. The points at which we break, circumstances shift, and the rules of the game are changed. It is difficult to imagine a love without some potential footnote or condition.

As Paul writes to the Romans, he is writing to a people not unlike us today. Last week, we heard Paul declare the radical gift it is to live in hope – he speaks into the turmoil of a diverse, divided people and calls their attention to a bright horizon. “Look,” he’s saying, “the sun is rising. The light is for you. Jesus Christ is a source of hope unlike any other you have seen or known or of which you’ve dared to dream. *Look*. Gather your courage, raise your eyes to this horizon, and here discover the only true source of a fresh and wild hope.”

As we continue in the eighth chapter of the epistle to the Romans today, Paul continues his encouragement. This faith in the risen Christ brings hope, yes, but the best is still to be revealed. This hope does not depend on our own vision or capacity or worthiness. No, Paul says, everything you have ever known about love has been changed. There are no transactions here. There is no reciprocation. There is no gift for a gift, eye for an eye, or checklist for you to complete to receive what has been saved for you. Here is the only thing unconditional. It is the

love of Christ Jesus. “What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?”

Paul knows that the people to whom he writes have been brought to their breaking point. They have known what it is to be without hope – caught in the midst of a world that insults their dignity as it demands their soul. Yet he assures them that they have only just begun to see something different. Something new is beginning here. “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” he asks. “Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” Christians in Paul’s day had known all of these. His response to his own question is like being swallowed by the earth and drop-kicked into another dimension: “No,” he writes, “in all these things we are more than conquerors...” but notice how he finishes here: we are conquerors, not through our own skill or sword or worthiness, but “through *him who loved us*.” Love without measure or condition. A love without an end. St. Catherine of Siena in the 14th century wrote that Jesus is “pazzo d’amore” – *crazy with love* – out of his *senses* with unbridled, unqualified love for the ones God has made. Crazy with love – for the world, for the Church, for all of us. *Pazzo d’amore*.

It is my delight to tell you that it is love like this that brought me into the Episcopal Church. Like so many of us, I did not grow up attending an Episcopal Church, and I have been asked if I became Episcopalian so that I could be ordained as a woman. I am so happy to have received this vocation, but in fact that was very much not the reason I found my way here. In fact, I became Episcopalian because I met the love of Jesus here. I accidentally stumbled upon love without measure or condition – a savior who is *pazzo d’amore* – in an Episcopal Church in Los Angeles, California. Talk about being drop-kicked into another dimension.

I moved to Los Angeles in my early twenties, and I arrived on a Greyhound Bus. At the bus station downtown, an older woman told me I “looked like a nice girl” and that I should “be careful not to end up one of those girls on Hollywood Boulevard.” This woman did not know that I was literally on my way to move into an apartment on Hollywood Boulevard. I hadn’t even seen it, just agreed over email to take over the lease, and what *I* didn’t know was that this apartment happened to be across the street from St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal Church. When I saw it, I was disappointed. It was a beautiful church, but it wasn’t my tradition. “Oh well,” I thought. At least it was pretty.

But about a week or so into my residence there, I noticed the church sign. The sign advertised daily Mass. I had been attending Mass every day at a nearby Roman Catholic church, but the Roman Catholic services were at 7:30 AM, and this Episcopal Church listed their services at 7:00 PM, which – quite frankly – sounded like a better deal. And so I decided to see what it was like.

St. Thomas looks like a place from a fairytale. It is like stepping into a jewelry box: bright with stained glass windows, golden candles everywhere, icons lining the tall stone walls that stretch up to a high ceiling that always seems shrouded in a mist of incense. When I stepped through the doors for the first time, I imagined that this must be a parish for wealthy Hollywood people. It must be filled with celebrities and music moguls. The priest had multiple sets of vestments for every season. The communion chalices was lined with gemstones. This must be a parish for people far more important than I – surely. But I was about to be surprised.

On my first Sunday there, I was shocked to see that about a third of the congregation was made up of people who were living on the streets. They left their tents and bags in the back of church. Some of them brought their dogs, right on inside. The rector greeted each of these people and their pets by name. Several of the people were on drugs. Some were in mental distress. A

dignified usher in a smart sport coat greeted each one of them as if they were Oscar winning actors. He walked them to the best seats in the building as if they were beloved family members. There were all sorts of people in the parish that day – some of whom I recognized from their roles on television – but it was clear, from the beginning, that this rich tapestry of a parish belonged to the poor.

After the service, I was greeted by an older gentleman who has attended that parish for over thirty years. He took me around the nave and the side chapels, and in an unassuming, gentle sort of way, told me about how that church - during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s that devastated that city in ways that are still being grieved - that church was the only church that would offer funerals for those who died from AIDS and HIV. Members of the vestry went down to USC hospital to pull bodies out of dumpsters to give them proper burials. The columbarium was in the walls, and it is filled with the memories of Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Evangelicals, agnostics, and countless others whose bodies could not find a resting place until that place - that church - welcomed them home. It was crazy, that ministry. Crazy with love.

This is the love of our Lord Jesus. This is the only thing without end. This is love without measure or condition. This love has belonged to you since the beginning of time. It is yours to rest in. It is yours to hope in. It is yours to proclaim with your lips and in your life. And whatever burdens we bear or trials we face, we are assured: “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Amen.