

“A Little Much”

Scripture Readings: Philippians 3:4b-14, 1 John 4:16-21.

Alright, I will fully admit that today is... a little much. Baptisms. Communion. Kenya Sunday. And then drive-thru communion, and the Kenya craft fair, children and youth curriculum pick up, and I put our tech and music and communications team members through the absolute ringer to pull all these pieces together this week, and I'm sorry. And I wish I could say this will never happen again but... honestly, that's probably not true.

My husband, Jesse, likes to joke that there is such a thing as “Laurie-ing” – the sometimes messy conclusion of being a little too much. I tend to always think I can fit just a few more toppings on to a pizza than any crust can be expected to structurally support. I tend to believe I can always fit one more hymn into any worship service. I have broken an embarrassing number of suitcase zippers trying to close them when I am certain that all of this will. Indeed. Fit. Partly this can be attributed to an overly optimistic approach to the laws of physics, and more so it comes from a sense of exuberance, abundance, the deep-down joy of living a life of *“a little too much”*.

And if I'm honest, I've always found the apostle Paul to be... A little much in his own way. His language of confession, conversion, his open zeal and passion for his faith... it makes me uncomfortable. I get it – he's writing from a place of physical pain, fear, the stress and strain of imprisonment. I certainly feel for the guy. And maybe my reticence toward Paul has nothing to do with him and everything to do with the way his words are so often used to hurt people, to twist the Christian faith into something misogynistic, or anti-Semitic, or xenophobic, or cruel. That's certainly not Paul's fault. Centuries of translation and interpretation and cultural pressure invariably cause confusion, and frequently harm. Can't hold that against Paul.

His words are some of the most passionate in the whole Biblical story, and I admit I find it hard to look right at them, like the way strangers avert their eyes at someone crying on a public bus. We don't know what to do with that kind of intensity. It's too real. Too alive. Too close to the soul. Too much.

But Paul's got 13 and a half books of the Bible to his name, and I spent about eight hours last week re-watching “The Great British Bake-off” so maybe I should show a little deference. I will give him full marks for consistency because whatever he did, whether persecuting Christians or converting people to Christianity, he did it with an unparalleled level of gusto. We know he was in Damascus, Rome, Tarsus, Jerusalem, Cyprus, Pamphylia, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Macedonia, Derbe, Galatia, Samothracia, Neopolis, and Philippi, obviously. Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, and back to Antioch, and many of those places he visited twice. He started churches on a few different continents at a time when travel was perilous and ridiculously hard. Paul and his colleagues were often hungry, cold, on the run, and entirely dependent on the compassion of fledgling flocks of Christians. He was ostracized, flogged and / or imprisoned a half dozen times, chased, lowered in a basket over a Roman wall to escape, and gets described as “unimpressive in appearance” which is a pretty bad first century burn. He healed an enslaved girl, survived an earthquake, and then stuck around to convert his despairing jailer. He preached, exhorted, instructed, and wrote Alexander Hamilton quantities of letters.

He had to be kind of exhausting to be around, but from all appearances he incarnated his faith so fully. He wasn't just a Christian in name, or in association, or even in profession. He was a Christian with his whole self. And it worked. Jesus did the salvation part, but a lot of the reason the church exists at all? That comes down to the communications juggernaut of Paul. He met a

moment of a world in turmoil, so many people who were sick or scared or angry, and he lived the good news right out loud with them.

So I wonder if that particular brand of being “a little too much” is exactly what we need in this moment. It seems to me that this moment of ... everything... calls for the wildly intense language and presence and faith of a man in jail who is more than willing to suffer prison and worse for the sake of the Christ he follows. Maybe in this moment when all we want to do is hold each other at arm’s length – or further if at all possible – the response isn’t to shut down and hide, but instead to answer the calling. To recognize that we are called to love our neighbors in a way that reflects that terribly difficult line of Paul’s “I want to know Christ.” Do you? Do you really? I’m not always a hundred percent sure I do... at least not if it means having a faith like Paul’s.

This is the calling toward the big rambunctious life-altering love of Jesus Christ. In some ways, it is easier to love our neighbors around the globe – we share a common mission and a joy of relationship that we absolutely have to choose because it’s by no stretch convenient for anybody involved. We choose each other, and we love each other. It’s much harder to love... all our neighbors. Those neighbors with yard signs that make my blood pressure spike. People who espouse hatred. People who are casual with the lives and well-being of others. Being consumed with the love of knowing Jesus Christ might rob me of my ability to just dismiss those with whom I so completely disagree.

Love like Paul’s experience of love with Christ, that’s not something you can neatly summarize on a throw pillow. It’s not love like easy answers and “let’s just agree to disagree and be nice to each other.” That’s the kind of love that comes from risking the audacious, of being vulnerable enough to say hey, here I am, fully human, full of faults, and hoping to be loving and loved anyway. And it’s the kind of love that looks every stranger square in the eye and, recognizing their full humanity right back. Starting from a place of genuine love and only then moving to address all that divides us. That is a risky and dangerous kind of love.

There’s a cultural phenomenon called Humans of New York, and they post stories on Instagram chronicling the lives of average New Yorkers. Snapshots into the lives of the strange and the ordinary, young and old, newcomers and life-long residents. With a few photos and an interview, we get a window into the lives of strangers. This past week, they chronicled the story of a woman, now nearly 80, Stephanie, who went by the stage name of Tanqueray, one of the few Black women go-go dancers in the 1960’s and 70s in New York. Her story, told over 32 posts, is bawdy, funny, poignant, heart-breaking, and sweet. Stephanie has lived a hard life, an abusive childhood, a tempestuous marriage, and a whole lot of loneliness. As a result of the massive outpouring of support from followers on Instagram, over two million dollars were raised for a charity of Stephanie’s choosing, supporting the lives of homeless kids in New York. A further result was the reunion of Stephanie and her sometimes estranged son, and he was honest about their relationship. It was hard. It was distant. But in the end, he said, “All the time, people are either showing love or crying out for it.”

Consider that for a moment. “All the time, people are either showing love, or crying out for it.”

People are a little too much. We’re needy, and messy, and self-centered, and mean. And we’re compassionate and silly and soulful and loving. We are, all of us, just a little much.

But so is Jesus, in His love for us. Amen.