

Choose Love

Scripture Readings: Psalm 138, Mark 3:20-35

Good morning. I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart. For this day! For this community. For a time to remember, and reconnect, and to resurrect the roots of the church in a newly reformed world. We have been transplanted into a new world and while none of us would have chosen the path we took to get here, here is where we find ourselves. In hybrid worship. Masked, maybe a little unsure, but together. Peeking out into the world to see what still stands and what has fallen away in the year past. I give thanks that we get to navigate re-entry, reimagining the church and ourselves, in communion with one another. For those joining us online from anywhere in the world, and those right here in the pews, Welcome home. Thank you – for choosing community, for choosing this family, for choosing love.

This year has taken so much from so many, not the least of which is our usual interpretation of community. None of us needs another litany of the losses we've endured. They are too numerous to count. As we navigate re-entry, we must give room to grieve together. To lament, to attend to the hurt places, to heal gently and slowly as we share the memories and find our way back out of the dark. None of this pain is healed, let alone scarred over. Not yet. Give it time. Be gentle.

This year has also given us a difficult, complicated gift, a profound reminder: that life, all of life, is so very fragile. Strong and delicate as a spider's web. It is a precious, tenuous thing that we tend to rush past at 80 miles an hour with our agendas and meetings and appointments to be kept. And this season has stopped us in our tracks, held our faces in its hands like a frantic parent finding a child who'd gone missing and said "Look. Notice. Do you know how easily all of it can be taken away? Do you understand how fragile this home, this family, this life really is?"

Oh yes, now we know.

We have soaked the knowledge of our own fragility into our bones. We are aware of the aspects of our identities, and our communities, that are so easily lost, so easily broken.

We live and pray and work and exist in a culture, in a context, in the confines of our lived realities. We don't exist in a vacuum. The church never has. We exist in a nation so deeply divided – and it has been for a very long time, with the events of this past year throwing those divisions into remarkably sharp relief. We don't trust each other. Maybe with good reason. We've learned to encounter each other throughout this year with necessary caution and some really profound suspicion. Have you been sticking to your bubble? Have you worn your mask? Are you going to put my life, my family's lives in jeopardy? How are your politics? Are you on the side of the angels, which is of course whichever side I happen to be on?

It's bleak, friends, and it's cowardice to not acknowledge that. We aren't returning to something that is all sunshine and ease. We are stepping forward onto a poorly lit path, under the shadows of civil unrest and unimaginable loss.

I'm not here to lead you out. I wish I were, but I'm in here with you. I don't know the way out of the darkness. But I do know the path of Christ – which is to walk forward, and always, always, always err on the side of choosing love.

Out of fragility and out of love, we get to figure out how to be the church. Now. In 2021. In Appleton, Wisconsin. Building on all that we have learned. Not the least of which is that the church can be the church for a whole year without a building, as long as we've got people eager to love and serve one another, the world, and God. People who choose community over self. People who are called to one body, one spirit, one hope.

Even if I don't know you personally yet, I know you've chosen community because you're here. You've stuck by this church – or maybe you've found us in the time of pandemic. You've been generous in your giving, showed up to serve in the community, and committed your talent and time to doing ministry together. And it hasn't been easy.

We have not merely marked time for a year. You've given generously to our mission partners, donated, fed the hungry and clothed the cold, supported Kenyan children in school on the other side of the world, and staved off famine among their families. You've helped ensure there was sufficient fuel for our siblings at Pine Ridge. You've walked, planted, listened, learned, explored, and maintain the record for having more book clubs than any church I've served. Wow do y'all love your book clubs. We've interrogated the role of racism in our lives and in our community and had some difficult, necessary conversations. You've dedicated your support to our LGBTQ community, and lived out your faith in countless ways. Today's service Sunday is a snapshot of all that work and love, and a chance to serve in fellowship with one another. Today is a homecoming, to be sure. But home is wherever we live out our worship. We are home and we are family.

Now, as Jesus is quick to remind us – home and family are not defined by where you were born or who raised you. Home is where you choose to be, to rest, and to plant your heart. Family is who you choose to share your life with. We are a home. We are a big church, but we are a family. God calls us as individuals to all kinds of communities and relationships throughout our lives, but we are here because we chose and choose and are always choosing again to do so. We are deciding to live in community, shoulder to shoulder as we point our hearts and lives toward God. That's a powerful thing. God doesn't force us into community, God calls us to community, offers it to us as a gift. And you are where you are because you chose to accept that gift. Because you choose love.

Now opting in for community and choosing love is not easy, especially a community of diverse beliefs and convictions, from a variety of life experiences. It is much harder than just shrugging and agreeing to disagree.

And love isn't just... unity. Honestly, I find unity to be a bit of a dangerous word. It is a word we wave around like a flag in this country. Unity is used to cover all manner of sin, to absolve us from reckoning with the inequities baked into our systems and culture. Unity, when it is tactfully ignoring the subtle – and the not so subtle - signs of hatred that permeate our culture for the sake of not disrupting a nice day out with the family. That isn't the kind of unity the church is called to embody.

Jesus tells us that the house divided cannot stand and of course he's right. So we can't just pretend we don't have divisions, and we aren't meant to just go out and build separate houses. It means we figure out how to live in genuine community with one another, built on authenticity, empathy, believing in something bigger than ourselves. It means we don't give up on justice – that the ways of living and being in the world that align with what our faith prescribes are not set aside for the sake of being polite to one another. That makes our faith decorative, a piece of jewelry or a flag that we can take on or off depending on the mood and if we're trying not to offend anybody. We don't give up on justice.

And genuine community – like that to which Christ is calling those around him – means we don't give up on love. Love not as some thing of flowers and fluff.

Love is the radical, gentle act of humanizing others, of standing outside yourself on behalf of those around you.

Here in pride month, I think it's worth noting that Jesus's family is super worried about the attention he will catch by being himself in the world. We don't get any impression that his family doesn't love him, or anything like that. But they don't understand what he's doing, and they worry about where it's heading. When they hear the ways he's preaching and teaching and catching the attention of those in power, they talk amongst themselves and say "he has gone out of his mind." The Greek word there – *existensi* – it translates more closely to "he is outside of or beside himself." The scribes condemn him as being possessed by demons, but his family comes from a place of worry, of fear. Jesus has lost it.

Just before today's scriptures start, he's healed a man on the Sabbath, proudly and right out in the open. Then he's healed a bunch of other people, so many that crowds are starting to surround him everywhere he goes, the hustle and crush of awakening hope. Rather than fading into the background and laying low for a while, Jesus chooses now to officially appoint his disciples. Simon called Peter, James and John, the sons of Zebedee the so called "sons of thunder", Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot ¹⁹ and Judas Iscariot. The journey of the twelve has begun and Jesus is making a name for himself. The story is being written. It's happening, and Jesus's mom and siblings are so worried for him. *Can't you just be a little less out there with all this Jesus? Come home. Calm down. Get back inside yourself. Please.*

Yet Jesus is being his fullest self, authentic to the world, because He is stepping outside of what is conventional or safe in order to truly love those who need Him. The only thing he is a man outside of – *existensi* to – is the version of himself that feels palatable, safe, controlled to anybody else. God calls us to be similar – a community full of people who are *existensi*, rejecting the world as we have been told again and again it has to look. Stepping beyond what we've known so that we might fully, wildly, unbelievably love those around us.

Following the life of Jesus Christ is letting our lives and love tell a new story. It's about writing a counter-narrative. If we are not loving and living in such ways that make our neighbors and friends worry that we're taking this Jesus thing a little too far, I'm not sure we're really being the church. If no one is looking at our church and going "well they've clearly lost it", "they are *existensi* – outside of themselves" then I'm not sure we're really following Christ. God offers the extraordinary as possible.

Pardeep Kaleka was born in India, and grew up in Wisconsin. He went to Marquette and then Alverno, and served as a police officer and educator in Milwaukee. He is a lifelong member of the Sikh tradition, which prioritizes serving the community. At times of crisis and natural disasters, Sikh communities show up, usually providing unimaginable quantities of delicious vegetarian food, so all can be welcome to the table. Sikhs believe in peace. Their faith builds on a central belief: "Be not estranged from one another for God dwells in every heart".

When Pardeep's father, Satwant Singh Kaleka, was one of the victims of a hate fueled massacre at the Sikh temple in Oak Creek, it would be understandable if Pardeep's faith suffered. How could you affirm God's indwelling in every heart when your own life has been torn apart by hate? Yet Pardeep did not relinquish his faith – he lived it, alongside an incredibly unlikely partner.

Arno Michaelis lives in Wisconsin too. An alcoholic by age 14, he joined and then led a white supremacist movement through the 1980's and into the 90's. Drawn in by a sense of purpose and place, fueled by addiction and hatred, he committed acts of vandalism and violence, recruiting hundreds to his movement with ugly rhetoric and music. Drawn out by becoming a father, by actually meeting people in the demographics about whom he espoused hatred, Arno began to question what he believed. After the Oak Creek shooting, he reached out to Pardeep. And, against anything that seems reasonable to me, Pardeep agreed to talk to him. From that unlikely meeting, and the slow process of unpacking their parallel experiences, the two men decided to form Serve2Unite, a peace-building group that focuses on helping people resist radicalization and find meaning elsewhere in their lives. You can learn more about their story by joining our Theo group, who is reading their shared book "The Gift of Our Wounds".

Pardeep and Arno show us the kind of impossible but necessary love that shows up and heals the wounds we inflict on one another. The type of love that, like Arno, none of us has a right to ask for. The kind of love that, like Pardeep, the world seems to insist cannot be. The kind of love that is required of us all.

As the scientist-poet-philosopher Carl Sagan put it, *For small creatures such as we the vastness is only bearable through love.*

Love like that is the counter-narrative we get to write with our lives – to a divided nation, to a hurt and hurting world – that love wins when we choose each other. Love wins.

I'm so grateful you've chosen each other just as God has chosen you. So grab a broom. Grab a paintbrush and some seeds and some work gloves. So let's go choose love. Let's get to work.

Amen.