Sermon for The Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, November 11, 2018
Text: Ruth 1:1-18 and Mark 12:28-34
Title: The practice of love

Love. It is a word made less powerful by overuse; less potent by familiarity. But love is also a mystery at the heart of our faith. The creative love of God that birthed the universe. The love of God made flesh in Jesus, our friend and savior. The love that animates and inspires our lives in the Spirit. Love, our tradition boldly proclaims, is stronger than death. We might even go so far to say, as the Beatles did, that love is all you need.

Today’s readings speak to a deep, enduring, hard-won love: not that sanitized, syrupy sweet stuff of Hallmark cards and RomComs; not the watered-down broth that can bind families into unhappy stasis; not some thing we value because it makes us feel good and giddy and glorious; but the active, powerful, intentional practice of love that flows from our life in God. This love is always marked by sacrifice. It can feel good and giddy and glorious at times, but it also calls us to give of ourselves in ways that are not always welcome in order to build up the other.

This holy love is the kind of thing that could make one declare, as we heard in our first reading, “Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried.” This text from the book of Ruth is one of the most popular passages read at weddings, so it’s interesting to note that in the Bible it has absolutely nothing to do with marriage. They are the words of a daughter-in-law, Ruth, to her mother-in-law, Naomi. A young woman to her adopted parent in the wake of the death of her husband. Ruth makes a pledge of fidelity in life and death – not necessarily a romantic declaration, though some scholars read it as such - but nevertheless one that ties lives together, redefines family relations, and gives someone purpose.

Our love for one another is not merely about functions or feeling, though. It is also about our faith. When a scribe asks Jesus which is the most important commandment of all, he quotes the Shema – a prayer of enduring importance in Judaism today straight from the book of Deuteronomy: “‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Love. It really is all we
need, evidenced by the circular logic of this teaching. How do we love God? By loving our neighbors as ourselves, like Ruth loved Naomi. How do we love our neighbors as ourselves? By devoting our whole selves to God.

Jesus and the scribe go on to agree that these two commandments are “much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” More important than the holidays and the principal feasts, than observing the liturgical seasons and getting the colors of the frontal right, more important than the beauty of the prayers in the Book of Common Prayer and the music in The Hymnal 1984. Living into the call to love every day – that is the work of our faith. That is the life of faith. Far from being the point of that faith, everything we do here on Sunday mornings – our equivalent of burnt offerings and sacrifices - is meant to nurture and nourish us in the disciplined exercise of love that unfolds out there, in our daily lives, in our homes and at our jobs and on the streets.

Which is in no way to diminish what we do here. If anything, remembering this makes our worship that much more important, because the truth is, there are costs to love. It is hard to extend ourselves in compassion and hope, over and over again, and to strike that delicate balance between total commitment to God, total presence in a world of hurt and hunger, and total acceptance of and tenderness towards our own needs. But God sets this calling before us knowing we are, together, capable of rising to the challenge, knowing that every day will offer us opportunities to learn and grow in love.

Take today. In addition to being Sunday, it is also Veterans Day, a holiday celebrating the signing of the Armistice which ended World War I exactly one hundred years ago, in the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, 1918. Ninety-nine years ago, on the first observance of what was then called Armistice Day, president Woodrow Wilson addressed the country, describing it as an occasion for “solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country’s service, and … gratitude for the victory, both because of the thing from which it has freed us and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of nations.”¹

President Wilson’s thoughtful letter does not celebrate or glorify war. Rather, it emphasizes the possibilities of peace and justice secured by those who fought so bravely and so selflessly in an utterly devastating one. It acknowledges the great sacrifice of soldiers surely

¹ For more information, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veterans_Day.
moved by love – love of families they believed were imperiled, of neighbors and communities they wished to protect, love of nation, love of neighbor – to set their natural desire for safety and security temporarily behind their call to serve.

When Armistice Day was renamed Veterans Day in 1954, President Eisenhower, himself a former General, explained that this had two purposes: first, to “solemnly remember the sacrifices of all those who fought so valiantly, on the seas, in the air, and on foreign shores, to preserve our heritage of freedom,” and, second, to “reconsecrate ourselves to the task of promoting an enduring peace so that their efforts shall not have been in vain.”

Veterans Day, unlike Memorial Day, is set aside to celebrate not only those who died while serving their country but also those who survived. It was established to honor the living and to encourage us, in all our occupations, to further the work of peace.

Whatever your perspective on the many wars of our lifetimes, the size or role of our military, there is something in here that is worthy of pause: an invitation to notice how the service of a few has shaped our life together, and a commitment to doing everything we can to eliminate the need for others to ever have to make a similar sacrifice. And so, as we reflect on our highest call to love today – consecrating our lives to loving God, neighbor and self – we are also invited to consider how that love manifests in our care for the veterans in our midst and our care for the peace they fought to secure.

Despite having the largest and best-financed military in the world, we have not always cared for veterans with the fierce fidelity, courage, and honor they often stand for. In 2013, Tracy K. Smith, named Poet Laureate in 2017, crafted a poem made up entirely of excerpts from letters of black soldiers who served in the Civil War and were appealing to the president for pay they never received. These men and their families wrote with urgency. “My husband … now in the Macon Hospital at Portsmouth … has not received any pay since last May and then only thirteen dollars … look and see that we never was freed yet, Run right out of Slavery in to Soldiery, and we hadent nothing atall and our wifes and mother most all of thhem is aperishing … I am willing to bee a soldier and serve my time faithful like a man but i think it is hard to bee poot off in such

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2 To learn more see: [http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/veterans-day-proclamation/](http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/veterans-day-proclamation/).
dogesh manner as that. Will you see that the colored men fighting now are fairly treated. You ought to do this ... We poor oppressed ones / appeal to you, and ask fair play."³

While most veterans today don’t face such struggles, and return from their service to lead fruitful, productive, beautiful lives, there is often a cost to them in this offering. Many struggle to access adequate physical and mental health care. One in seven adults without permanent shelter across the county once served in the military. And then there are those non-citizens who entered the service with a promise, not unlike those recently liberated slaves, the promise of a new life, people willing to serve their time faithfully, whose future is currently shaky. What would it cost us to extend ourselves in love to these neighbors, particularly the most vulnerable among them? To set aside some of our less urgent needs in the interest of greater understanding and greater compassion? And just as important, what would it cost us to reconsecrate our lives to promoting peace?

As people who believe we grow in our love for God by loving our neighbor, these questions are not abstractions. We come here to be nourished in our wrestling with just these kinds of hard and holy invitations. I don’t know precisely what this will look like in your lives, or in mine, not yet, but it seems like we owe some gratitude to those who have sacrificed for our safety. It seems like the example of self-giving and courageous love soldiers can at their best embody is an ideal worthy of our aspirations. It seems like the indignation that led us to engage militarily in conflicts involving gross human rights abuses – such as the holocaust – could inspire us more in our bold denunciation of the increasing anti-Semitic rhetoric and acts of violence in our country. It seems like knowing how poorly vulnerable servicemen and women have at times been treated would make us particularly cautious about their treatment today.

When asked to reflect on the poem I read earlier, Tracy K. Smith says that in researching this chapter of history she was most surprised by how hopeful the letters she discovered were. That even though those writing had been entirely locked out of the freedom of a democratic country until then, they still believed in that democracy and were willing to sacrifice for it. Willing to fight for it. She sees in this encouragement for our times, a reminder that our country and our communities, our neighbors, always imperfect, are “worth struggling for” and worthy of more than our cynicism. May we go forth from here this Veterans Day, emboldened in our

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practice of love, consecrating our lives to that love, and reconsecrating them to the pursuit of peace. Amen.