

Love Can't Wait

Matthew 1:18-25

Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

In her book *Learning To Walk In The Dark*, discussed just this past week by our Pastors' Book Club group, author Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of walking along the beach one day with her husband, and coming across a loggerhead sea turtle, struggling though the hot sand, barely clinging to life. The night lights from the city had confused the turtle, thinking it was starlight on the water, and the turtle couldn't find its way back to the ocean after laying its eggs. Taylor recounts the process of racing to the ranger station to get help for the vulnerable turtle. She recalls, "...An hour later [the sea turtle] was on her back with tire chains around her front legs, being dragged behind a park service Jeep back toward the ocean. The dunes were so deep that her mouth filled with sand as she went. Her head bent so far underneath her that I feared her neck would break. Finally the Jeep stopped at the edge of the water. Ed and I helped the ranger unchain her and flip her back over. Then all three of us watched as she lay motionless in the surf. Every wave brought her life back to her, washing the sand from her eyes and making her shell shine again. When a particularly large one broke over her, she lifted her head and tried her back legs. The next wave made her light enough to find a foothold, and she pushed off, back into the water that was her home. Watching her swim slowly away after her nightmare ride through the dunes, I noted that it is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down."¹

Throughout an entire book of beautiful stories and powerfully faithful metaphor, this is perhaps my favorite line of the entire thing, "It is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down."

This story, to me, seems to reflect so clearly what is often the way of faith. We, like the loggerhead turtle, are convinced that the way we are following will save us. Convinced we know the way and can save ourselves. And it's not always our own turtle fault. There are systems of sin which lead us astray just as the city lights of the humans confused the turtle. So we set farther and farther along the way that is nothing but death for us. And then grace comes along like the harsh chains of a ranger's truck, throwing us on our shell and dragging us toward the waters that will bring us life. The way of life is wide and merciful, but we have been so convinced of our narrow path to salvation for so long it feels like the hands that save us, the hands that have turned us upside down, are leading us to certain death.

It is fear that convinces us that faith is a narrow path. It is fear that convinces us that we walk along a faithful ridge line, and any stray step will cause us to fall to certain peril. It is fear that convinces us that we can walk this self-serving path toward salvation alone and save ourselves and our loved ones while those others we don't really care about fall.

¹ "Learning to Walk in the Dark" by Barbara Brown Taylor

But it is grace, God's way of eternal love, that points us back toward the abundant plain, the wide way of everlasting life that God has made known here on earth. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once famously said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice"². It is grace that calls us to walk, not a narrow path of faith, but a wide way that spans the moral universe arcing always toward love, hope, peace, and joy. God is always working toward these things, loving us and redeeming us always, until the very end. There are individual choices we make each day about what path we will walk, but Christ is calling us, flipping us over and dragging us through grace, back to the wide way of love here and now. Christ is drawing us to the waters that bring us back to life and tell of a new way.

Now I know, there are some of you who are troubled by this, and may quote back to me Matthew 7, where Jesus himself says, "*Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*" This is true. This is a hard way—an impossible way—for us to walk alone. We cannot save ourselves along this path. And Christ knows this narrow path to salvation. He walked it. He died on it. And through his love he has opened the wide way of eternal life for all people. As we hear in our Gospel lesson today, his very name is the promise that it is God who saves us, not we who save ourselves. His very name is the promise that God is with us, making clear the wide way of love, tearing down the mountains and filling the valleys that all people may walk in the plain of equity, to life everlasting.

In our gospel lesson today, Joseph himself was faced with the narrow, legal path of fear and anger. He could discard his pregnant fiancé, as she had violated the law. According to the laws of his people, he would have been right to do this. Yet the angel of the Lord spoke to Joseph, pointed him toward God's saving way, and Joseph chose to follow the way of love. He must have been terrified for what this would mean for him. And yet, as was the tradition of his people, he named Jesus, and claimed him as his own son. He named him according to God's promise, that it is God who saves. For both Mary and Joseph, this way of love that brought Christ safely into the world was terrifying, it was uncertain, it challenged everything they thought they knew. It required deep courage rooted in faith. I'm sure it was hard to know in that moment if they were "*being killed or saved by the hands that [turned their lives] upside down.*"

I'm sure King Ahaz thought in our first lesson today that he was being killed by God's promise. Nations raged and armies closed in around him. And God's promise to him is that a child will be born whose name will remind the nation of God's presence among them. "Trust me!" says the Lord! "TRUST ME."

² This quote is King's clever paraphrasing of a portion of a sermon delivered in 1853 by the abolitionist minister Theodore Parker. Born in Lexington, Massachusetts, in 1810, Parker studied at Harvard Divinity School and eventually became an influential transcendentalist and minister in the Unitarian church. In that sermon, Parker said: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice."

It's hard to know if you're being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down. This is the way of Grace. God is leading us along a way of love for all people. It is a wide way of hope. It is not the way we would be expecting. Righteous Joseph expected to follow the law. King Ahaz expected that strength would save him. But God's wide way of love and hope is anything but the expected. It is a way of love that turns the world up on its shell and leads to life-giving waters. It is a way in which we can confidently put our trust forever!

And we cannot follow in the way of love without courage. The way of love is not safety and security and doing things the way they've always been done, but this way is God's way. We can't do this work of love alone. We need the courage of one another in this community, always pointing us forward on God's way, not our way. We as people of faith can't manufacture this love on our own. We take heart in the name of Jesus—God will save. We take heart in the name of Immanuel—God is with us. We need the courage and love of God first. We, as Christ's church, carry these names into the weary world with courage and love.

For the sake of our neighbor in fear, our courage can't wait. For the sake of our neighbor in need, our love can't wait. Amen.