

Love Looks Different

April 12, 2020

One of my favorite stories may or may not be factual, but it's abundantly true. The story goes that in 1923, the great 20th century writer Franz Kafka was strolling in a park in Berlin when he came across a little girl who was sobbing uncontrollably. It seems the little girl had lost her favorite dolly, and was beside herself. Empathizing with the youngster, Kafka offered to help look for the doll. They looked for hours, but still could not find the doll. (Remember, times were different then.) As dusk settled, Kafka offered to meet the girl to begin the search again the next day.

Now, as an adult, Kafka understood that the doll was long gone, so when he arrived at the park the next day, he brought a letter for the little girl, "written" by her doll, which said, "Please don't cry. I took a trip to see the world. I will write to you about my adventures."

Thus began a friendship between the girl and Kafka. They would meet and Kafka would deliver letters which contained stories of the doll's great adventures! Then, one day, as Kafka's health worsened, he brought back the doll (he had bought one). He told the little girl that the doll had returned from her adventures abroad. The little girl was skeptical—the doll didn't look like her old one. Kafka had thought of this, and so he handed the girl a little girl another envelope. In it was yet another message from the doll, telling the little girl, "My travels have changed me." The little girl hugged the doll and took it home, happy.

Later that year, Kafka would die of tuberculosis.

It was only when the girl was an adult and she came across her childhood doll (which was now falling apart) that she found another note from Kafka, this one hidden inside the doll. It read, "Everything you love will probably be lost, but in the end, love will return in another way."

Friends, as we come together to celebrate Easter this year, I'm so very conscious that so much has been lost. A number of you are celebrating the first Easter without a spouse or child or parent who has died. Others have lost jobs or fear losing them. For some, your housing situation is precarious. For some, your sobriety has been lost. Many people's faith in our society has been lost. Whatever your loss, God's great Easter message echoes Kafka's final message buried in the body of the new dolly, "Everything you love will probably be lost, but in the end, love will return in another way."

Of the four Gospel accounts of Easter, the one we read today from the Gospel of John is my favorite. This will surprise those of you who participate in our Tuesday noon Bible Study because you know the Gospel of John is not my favorite. One of the reasons I love the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John is because Mary Magdalene doesn't recognize the risen Jesus the first time she encounters him. She talks with him, but mistakes him for the gardener. It is only when he says her name that she recognizes Jesus.

This becomes a thread through several of the post-resurrection experiences the disciples have of Jesus; in the story of the road to Emmaus, the story of the upper room, and the story of returning to fishing the Sea of Galilee, the disciples don't recognize Jesus at first. "Everything you love will probably be lost, but in the end, love will return in another way."

One of the messages of the crucifixion is that loss, real, abject loss, death and sin and pain and destruction are all very, very real, and none of us are going to be exempt from them. If God's beloved Son wasn't spared, there's no imagining we will be. Still, while "Everything you love will probably be lost, in the end, love will return in another way."

This pause to remember the value and lessons of loss and pain and sin and death and struggle is critically important in our celebration of Easter. Some of you have read Louise Penny's Inspector Gamache mystery novels. It's a lovely series set in the Eastern Townships of Quebec in which Inspector Gamache, a thoughtful, poetic, non-violent, homicide detective solves crimes. Think "Murder She Wrote" for the Masterpiece Theater set.

In the book titled, "The Cruellest Month," the character Ruth Zardo adopts two little duck eggs. Now, Ruth is a crusty old crone. She's horribly crass, steals her neighbor's whiskey, calls everyone names, but the townsfolk keep her around because she is also uncannily wise and often says what the others want to say but are too polite to allow pass their lips.

When Ruth adopts these duck eggs, it is WAY out of character. She nurtures them. She makes a little nest out of old towels and turns her oven on the lowest possible setting to keep them warm. And when one of the ducklings has a hard time breaking free of its shell, Ruth gently pulls some of the shell away.

I apologize that I'm going to spoil this part of the book for those of you who may eventually pick it up, but one of the ducks ends up living. In fact, it becomes Ruth's sidekick, saying, "duck, duck, duck," right along with her, but the other duckling dies. With wisdom, insight, and sorrow, Ruth reflects that it very well may have been the "help" she gave by easing the duckling's struggle to release itself from the shell that ultimately brought about its demise.

What we learn through struggle and pain and even sin and death, ultimately builds the muscles that allow us to live and thrive. "Everything you love will probably be lost, but in the end, love will return in another way."

So, what do we do with this as we celebrate Easter 2020, Easter of COVID-19, Easter of Safer at Home, Easter in which so many losses are so real? We take our lesson from the disciples, from Mary Magdalene, from the Abbey Bar and Grill. Yes, the Abbey Bar and Grill.

Now, some of you may be surprised to hear that I spent more time at St. Norbert Abbey than I did at the Abbey Bar and Grill when I was a student in De Pere, but an article this week is making me rethink the wisdom of that. In the article, the Abbey Bar and Grill stated that while supplies last, they will be handing customers whose takeout bill totals \$30 or more a gift card valued at \$20. They ask that customers pay it forward to someone who may not be able to afford to eat out or maybe as a “thank you” to those on the front lines like health care workers and first responders. They suggest customers keep in mind the elderly, or someone who is helping others during this trying time.

Friends, I can assure you that the Abbey Bar and Grill is bringing in just a fraction of its usual revenue right now. But instead of raising prices or ranting about policies, they’re doubling down on grace. They’re showing their core values. They’re living-in to Easter. In what could very well be the death of their business, they’re choosing to be on the side of love and generosity.

Now I know it takes resources to be able to do this, resources that many businesses don’t have. But it gives us a paradigm, a template, a model. Christ’s life, death, and resurrection tell us that healing is possible, redemption is real, AND death and loss and sin are powerful. But in the midst of loss, grace is eternal. Love wins. And therefore, our values, our true North remain, and staying centered in them will help us to recognize love when it returns.

We cannot hasten the dawn, but in the end, love WILL return in another way. Christ IS risen. Christ is risen, indeed. Alleluia, and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
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