

“LOVE AMONG THE RUINS”

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This sermon is called Love Among the Ruins and it is a meditation on the current weakness of Christianity in our context both at All Saints and in the Anglican or Episcopalian world, and more broadly, in the United States.

It's a kind of meditation on the situation of Christianity in our lives today and a few words of hope that might give joy and confidence, and in a fresh look.

Now, Balzac said the following:

“A monk or an old soldier ... these are the two men who have the truest estimate of life. “

I would say that what that means is that anyone who is combat weary – if you've ever been combat weary fighting battles with your husband or your teenager or in your parish or in your Christian world, you probably have a pretty good estimate of life.

Someone recently said to me that he was combat weary and I said I think I've got one up on you. I think I am combat dead. There's a significant difference actually.

You see, I believe that the position of the Prodigal Son whose father said, “My son was dead”, whose father said, “My son was lost”. That is the exact position in which we find ourselves, you see.

And the first thing you have to do to go forward is you have to see accurately the problems you are facing. This is true with alcoholics, with stroke victims, with damaged

relationships. I would say that the true situation here and in the wider communion I have served in for many years is a situation, a total Waterloo, a complete defeat.

It is a defeat because the anger and the animus and the broken lives and careers and disappointments that have been created on the left and on the right and in the middle are not sort of in process anymore but it is a dead duck.

And I would go so far as to say that Christianity in this country is coming on to be a dead duck. Wear your collar in a Borders book store today. In the old days, everybody was kind of nice to you if you wore your collar at Borders. But now, everybody's heavily PC and because of all **the ruptures ????** You're sort of bad. You're not even neutral.

Look at the city of Colorado Springs. I mean that church where Ted **Hagert(?)** let the whole world down, and he did, coupled with the disarray of the Episcopal diocese and the church out there. I know it intimately, that is all a lethal ad for Christianity.

There is not a figure in the world who is sincerely looking for an answer to the problems of life that would wish to be attracted to the mainstream Christian bodies in a town like that.

I always liked that old National Examiner issue. It just had one picture, picture in 1999, a picture of Michael Jackson and the headline "What Went Wrong?" I mean, it was all there.

What I want to say is that it's not really, you know one side is defeated and has to regroup, or one side feels terribly put upon and excluded and now has to have a new strategy. I no longer see it that way. I think it is much worse than that. I think everybody lost.

I think we are at ground zero and I can't imagine in my twenties, when I traveled from church to church in Washington, DC – I went to the big Methodist Church near Ward Circle. I went to the City Christian Church downtown. I went to the Luther Place Lutheran Church.

I went to all these churches as a college undergraduate looking for something and found nothing until I met Malcolm Marshall, but nonetheless found nothing. I feel that today if I were in that 19-year old position, I don't know where I'd go. But I strongly doubt if I'd look in one of our mainstream churches. So, what went wrong?

And the thing about this is we have to say it's not just about groups of people. Something very big went wrong. It's not just about a certain group who are up tight, or a certain group who overplayed their hand, or certain individuals who went too far, or certain others who became overly reactive. I think that's not adequate.

I think we have to say something worse is going on here. Something about a distortion in Christianity itself caused this massive public relations disaster that our church has from Roman Catholicism to orthodoxy to liberal Protestantism to conservative Episcopalianism. It is a disaster. And it is not good enough to just say it was that group. Something in our actual practice was mistaken.

Now that's what I think. It's a radical thing and most of my colleagues will not go there. They become very defensive. And they want to blame it on an individual, or a particular policy, and I say, "No, it is too widespread".

We are the Germans. This is Germany in 1945, August, and it is not about trying to figure out if we can win and maybe we can take Joe Johnson's Confederate army out to Texas

and maybe we can hold out a few more months on the blogs – I’m mixing my metaphors here – Maybe Joe Johnson in Texas can hold out for three more months and we’ll win. No, no, no, no! Christianity needs to regroup. What has gone wrong?

Now there are two things I’d like to say that I hoped we would explore together at All Saints. We’re just the one place. But I think there two things we can explore and then I’d like to conclude with a movie illustration and a rock and roll illustration per usual.

The two things that I would like to explore are – They are the Biblical themes in the eight to ten years that I hope I’ll be given to serve here as your rector.

One is Aspects of Love and one is The Theology of the Cross.

Now, Aspects of Love. I deliberately choose that from the Anthony Lloyd Webber musical which is very heavy. Do not see it. It is awful, utterly immoral, amoral, and super-amoral. Nevertheless, the title is brilliant: Aspects of Love.

And what we need to look at is – When there has been a death and when things that we value very highly have proven to withstand the slings and arrows of human sin, we have to look at love again.

There’s a great quote in T.S. Elliott’s fourth play, The Confidential Clerk. This is the one that nobody reads, so-called comedy. And I want to say when I read it that I sure am glad he wasn’t writing for Seinfeld, because it’s not funny. But he regarded it as an hilarious commentary on English people. But he did say one thing at the end of this play. When the young hero says, “Now that I have abandoned all of my illusions and ambitions, all that is left is love.”

It's a no brainer. And I do believe that it will be a useful exercise to spend the next ten years thinking about love. And, when I say "love", I mean "one-way love", the love that is grace, not me and you.

I'm talking about the love that, when I have nothing to offer but what I have to offer is actively alienating. (You're meant to have piercing looks into your own marriages).

But I'm talking about one-way love which is an aspect of love which is the opposite of criticism. You all know that the only way to kill a relationship is through criticism. You'll kill your marriage, you'll kill your curate, you'll kill your bishop, you'll kill your bishop's cannon, you'll kill your warden, and your warden will kill you, you'll kill your child, your child will kill his grandfather through criticism.

And the Aspect of Love that we need to look at today is one-way love that eschews criticism or judgment. This is why it was said of Jesus very negatively "He spends his time with tax gatherers and hookers. He is a friend of sinners". And Jesus said it three times, "Yes, I am the friend of sinners".

So I want to deal with you – I think we probably miss it here in relationship to judgment and criticism and we probably have to go back to the question of grace and imputing love which is one-way love toward terribly distressing and difficult people.

Now the second theme I'd like to underline with you and that's the theme of what is technically called The Theology of the Cross. Now that is just fancy Reformational language, the Theology of the Cross, for the following:

"God meets you at the Big Hurt. God meets you at the Big Hurt."

The theology of glory says that God meets you when you are doing well. That's a sign of God's blessing. And that's often what you seem to hear.

But the Reformation powerfully, existentially, turned it around and said, "No, no, that's God for athletes" and we know about baseball players. We're talking about the God who meets us in the Big Hurt. Let me just read to you three sentences from Gerhart 's Indispensable Practice(?). This particular book will alter everything. And this is what the great Professor , now dead, says:

"The Theologian of Glory is like one who considers curing addiction by optimistic exhortation. The Theologian of the Cross knows that the cure is much more drastic. A Theologian of Glory attempts to cure those addicted to Glory by optimistic appeal, that is by the law, but what happens thereby is only a reinforcement of one's own illusions about oneself. Theologians of the Cross, however, operate differently. They operate from the assumption that there must be a bottoming out or an intervention. Theologians of the Cross know that we cannot be helped by optimistic appeals to success, strength, wisdom, happy family, positive thinking and so forth because those things themselves are the problem.

The truth must be spoken. Well, this is the second emphasis that I hope to offer in the eight to ten years that I am given here at All Saints. You might say that the reputation that Christians have achieved probably since the last Presidential election has brought us to such a place as Germany in August 1949 -- that the cure must be drastic ... and so I am suggesting that the cure is going to be completely walking away from anything else but the questions of ...

What is love?

What about the Big Hurt?

And it will have to do, I believe, with the cross.

Well, this is what I am attempting to say – the problem that we deal with, whether it is in Anglicanism or our families or the Colorado Springs ‘variance’(?) of Christianity is so fundamental that we have to start at the beginning.

I am talking about a radical rethink. Something went wrong. Michael Jackson – something clearly has gone awry and so I in my own way am going to focus on the meaning of love and the power of the Cross in the Big Hurt.

Well, I’m going to conclude by mentioning a movie, let me say this – Remember the song Wooden Ships by Crosby, Stills and Nash. Come on, who here was at Woodstock? You see, often very conservative people have very interesting prior lives. Anybody who was at Woodstock will remember the song Wooden Ships. It is a masterpiece, go out and buy it now.

These two wooden ships, the world has been destroyed, these wooden ships meet in the middle of the ocean, the Atlantic Ocean. They are all living on the berries, they’re all dead and the last question one asks of the other, “Who won?” Now we are the wooden ships. Go home and listen to Wooden Ships by Crosby, Stills and Nash and you’ll be exactly where All Saints Church, the Episcopal world and Christianity in America are. And then you can start to bury the dead.

Now I’m going to finish with a quick illustration and a note from Brian Wilson who wrote it tonight to encourage us in this service.

In 1957, a Japanese movie came out called *The Burmese Heart*, what we consider today flick. Nobody in the greatest generation would ever see this film because it is about Japanese soldiers in the Philippines at the end of the war. And they all get killed.

One of the, however, is almost killed by the British -- but he is left alive but grievously wounded. And the camera stencils out all that you can see, all the dead soldiers but him, dead but not dead. When he comes to, he begins to wander about the countryside asking himself, "Who am I? What am I? And what can I do to live at the end of the war with everyone dead?"

He happens to stumble upon a group of Anglo-Catholic English nursing sisters and, in the jungle, he sees these Anglo-Catholic English nursing sisters burying a dead Japanese soldier. And they're singing the hymn which we will have later in the service, *Abide With Me*.

Now, think about it ... A Japanese movie, 1957, a totally disoriented man, these English nursing sisters burying a Japanese soldier singing *Abide With Me*. He is totally converted and he sees that his great work in life must be to bury war dead because there are thousands of bodies strewn all over the island. And he goes back in this very powerful movie, *The Burmese Heart*, and he buries war dead.

Now, sometimes I am not sure whether the vocation that Mary and I have been given is to bury the war dead from the Episcopal culture wars. And I counted the other day. There are 115,000 of us -- only 15 are dead. The blogs, I counted the blogs, actually about 4200 and they are all men.

Now, the thing about it is – we need to bury the body here. This **Internal** conflict is over and we need to bury the body as soon as possible. Right now we're sort of gazing at the body in the mortuary, fondling the body in the mortuary. Bury the body, bury the body.

That's part of **_____** at All Saints, Chevy Chase. And I am doing it therapeutically. I'm doing it for you, even if you don't want me to do it. You need me to do it. You must have someone bury the body and end it.

Then, as part of it, we go back to our home country and rebuild. We bury the body and then we rebuild. What went wrong? We will never go there again. What is right? God loves sinners and God helps us in the midst of the Big Hurt.

Well that's all I wanted to say. And I hope you'll look at the back of the bulletin now and cooler people, or whom I'm not one, tell me now that Brian Wilson's new song is the absolute best song for the Episcopal Church today.

This is Brian Wilson, the depressed and usually neurotic, possibly psychotic, inspired lead for the Beach Boys – and his new song is called Midnight's Another Day. And this is the end of my sermon, "Midnight, A New Day".

That's All Saints. We are in midnight. That's the Episcopal Church, it's midnight. That's the Anglican Communion. It's midnight. But, as Crosby Stills and Nash also sang, "The darkest hour is just before the dawn". And that is my vision from the Prodigal Son, of the dead who has risen, and the lost who was found for our church. And I hope you will support me in it. Amen.