

Rev. Nathan Detering

February 24, 2019

“Unconditional”

“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Keep our hearts tender.

Keep our eyes soft.

Because this is what we are about:

We know there is no answer but to love one another.

We bear witness against unnecessary destruction.

We gather in community to practice being the person

The world is calling us to be.

We cannot do everything,

But we can do something, and that something is not nothing.

So forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything

That is how the light gets in.”

I think it was Meister Eckert who said that if the only prayer you ever

Say in your life is thank you it will be enough,

Which may worth debating at another time,

But for now, friends, it is all I want to say –

Thank you for your countless emails and deliveries of trays of lasagna

And prayers and bags of groceries and ingredients for hot fudge sundaes

And frozen pots of youth group made lentil soup -

All given us after our son, Emerson, returned home

From the 8 scary days in the hospital from pneumonia,

And now recovering at home, eating it all, no matter the order or the mixing.
Lentil soup after ice cream sundaes after pasta after cereal after crackers and
cheese?

Why not?

Because they call it comfort food for a reason –

Comfort for the body that lost 14 pounds in week,
comfort the soul that reckons, as we all do, with the vulnerability of this
beautiful, fragile, and often resilient vessel that is our body,

Comfort for the parents whose hearts beat not just in their chests, our chests,
But also in the bodies of our children,

Which is why it is said the love is a holy and fearful thing,

Holy and fearful to love what death can touch,

And this goes not just for parents but for all of us, doesn't it,

Because we all love someone, whether it's a shout, a murmur,

A chant, or even just a whisper.

So thank you for loving us all through this terrible time,

a time that we've learned even more now was more harrowing
than in the moment adrenaline allowed us to see.

Here we say that spirituality is what do in private, by ourselves,

But religion is what we do in public, with and for each other.

And you showed me, us, just how much of our religion is love.

I have lived with myself long enough to know that I am,

what they call in the parish ministry world, a confessional preacher.

It's not the only way, but it is mostly my way.

And what that means in this instance

Is that I am wearing my heart on my stole.

Can you see it?

And what my heart confesses this morning is that

I have no idea what kind of soul-searing pain it is to lose

A child,

Something that some of you, some of us, have experienced.

But this month I glimpsed it,

And it has been – there are no other words – heartrending and terrifying

And vulnerable.

It makes me want to run, a running hug (sermon two Sundays ago)

To those of you who have, and just hold you there, hold us there,

Because what else is there to do?

And it has also made me return, in way I haven't for long time,

To the stories I remember hearing as an altar boy, over and over again,

In the Catholic Church of my childhood,

Remembering from somewhere, from somewhere it came to me,

The story of the Prodigal Son.

And even though I know many of us don't read ourselves to sleep

With the scripture, including me,

We remember it....

About the mom who had two daughters (bible is all male, but let's add some gender inclusivity ok?)

The younger one who asked her mom for her share of the property,

And then a couple days later bought a first-class airline ticket

Out of, say, Worcester,

And went straight west to the bright lights and big promises
Of say, Vegas....
And though initially, for the first year or two, she gambled
Well and won just enough to think that she could lick this thing
And beat the house at their own game,
Over time she lost a little, and then put up more to cover her losses,
And lost more, and put up even more to cover her losses,
And lost more...
And with her remaining share of the property,
Let's say she bought a first-class ticket (but a bus this time)
Over to L.A.,
Where she knew a guy who knew a guy who knew a guy
Who said if she hustled selling, let's say, maps to the stars
Then she would HIT IT BIG!!

But she didn't, and soon she was out of bucks, and before she knew it
She was on the street, asking for cash for the next meal, the next day.
But then she remembered her family back home,
And he remembered how her mom had all kinds of folks working
For the family business, and that none of them were going hungry.

So she said, "*I will get up out a here and tell my mom I have failed her,
I no longer to be called her daughter, just treat me like one of your staff.*"

So she set off, a one way, no frills, bus ticket that had stops at every
Waffle House from the West Coast, down south because it was winter,
And then up north, all the way back to Massachusetts.

But even when she was still far off, say in Connecticut or Rhode Island,
The mom saw that she was coming closer,
Because she could the both had smart phones
And the mom used the Find My Location to always keep track of her
daughter,
Every morning for these last years checking her, sending texts she didn't
Answer, watching the fading dot, dot, dot bubble to see if she would
respond...

But now, these last weeks, watching as the blue dot moved across
The country day by day, hour by hour,
So that when her bus pulled into the station there in Worcester
The mom was waiting,
And when the doors opened,
The mom ran onto the bus and into the arms of her daughter,
And kissed her and stroked her hair and brought her head
To her chest the way she had when the daughter was baby..

And the daughter tried to say, *'Momma, I have failed you, I'm
Not your daughter, just...'*
And the mom saying, *"shhhh, shhhh, my angel, my darling, my baby,
Stop talking, you're coming home, and I'm gonna make you
Those calzones you love, and we're going to throw you a big party,
And everyone will come..."*

And so they got home, and they began to celebrate, and the calzones
Were piping hot, and the music was kickin',

And everyone was thrilled to have her home,
Except for...the other, older sister, the 'responsible one'
Who never left for big lights and bright promises of somewhere else,
Who stayed put and helped with the family business
And nurtured a beloved resentment for what she hadn't done..

And who then, when her mom came into the kitchen to get some more
Sauce for the calzone, complained bitterly about how unfair this is,
Having the big party and 'woo-hoo' for the sister who basically abandoned
Them.

And then the mom saying, taking her face in her hands,
Saying 'you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.
But we had to celebrate because this sister of yours was dead
And has now come to life;
She was lost and now is found.
I never stopped giving up hope. I never stopping loving her.'"

It makes sense, but when I was a kid I remember always focusing
On the siblings in this story;
As the oldest, taking the side of the older sibling, sharing in her indignity.

But I think this story came to me this week...
Because I am learning again and again what it means to be parent here...
The parent who has worried about losing a child,
And who desperately hopes and prays for safe return,
And rejoices when he does, no matter what...
....no matter the risk that this loving costs,

....no matter how fearful it is love.

....no matter how vulnerable loving someone else makes us feel.

....no matter how fragile our bodies.

....and tries to go on loving the other children even if the unimaginable has happened, as I know some of you have.

....goes on wearing our heart on the outside of our bodies,

Because while loving what death can touch is fearsome, it is also hopeful,

To love, to see, to hold, to cherish....unconditionally.

You know what “Prodigal” means?

I learned just yesterday, actually, that it means ‘wasteful extravagance.’

Hmmm.

Loving beyond our fear of loss feels sometimes like that.

Loving despite the fact of death feels like that.

Loving despite the risks feels like that

Loving bodies that get sick or old or wrinkled or grey

Or do what we want even though we might be young or work out a ton...

Feels like that.

When fear comes, when loss comes, when disappointment come –

And they will –

We have choices.

We can play it safe. We can get protected. We can give our energy only to what we know will work out. We can give love only to those who we think deserve it.

We can wall away our heart.

Or, we can love wastefully and extravagantly and unconditionally despite the risk.

We can love wastefully and unconditionally beyond the fear
That we can't protect our children, our partners, ourselves from
All the threats.

We can love wastefully and unconditionally in a world, a politics,
That might keep us at home, all private, just caught up with our own,
Because fear is in the air.

We can love wastefully and unconditionally and extravagantly the
Beloveds in our life, no matter what has happened, or what is happening,
Saying with the mom 'all that is mine is yours.'

Because here is our world, right, here is world. Beautiful and terrible things
Happen.

Keep our hearts tender.

Keep our eyes soft.

Because this is what we are about:

We know there is no answer but to love one another.

So this week I found myself

It is so

*It is a fearful thing
to love what death can touch.*

*A fearful thing
to love, to hope, to dream, to lose*

A thing for fools, this,

And a holy thing,

*a holy thing
to love.*