

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, Year B

March 22, 2018

St. James, Wheat Ridge

By The Rev. Sarah Berlin

**“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”** I don’t about you but this is the first verse I memorized in Sunday School and it still makes my heart leap. God so loved all, and God so loves us. God’s love is the central message of our faith. And yet, some hear it, and some don’t.

Last October I conducted a wedding at the Cathedral. The groom is Episcopalian, grew up at the Cathedral in fact, and the bride is Jewish from a family that doesn’t really practice their faith except for High Holy Days. They were a delightful couple I really enjoyed working with them. In premarital counseling they made it clear that they had no plan to practice any religion in their marriage and just doing this for the parent’s sake.

In my homily I emphasized the importance of God’s blessing upon their marriage and talked about how central blessings are for both Christians and Jews. Then I pulled out my Jewish Prayer Book – which I do read and love, and I said a Jewish blessing prayer for their union. The bride’s face lit up and she turned around to look at her family – so pleased I had drawn from their tradition. Then I looked at both of them and said, “God loves you, God cares about you, God cares about your marriage and will be there to help you.” They had such surprised looks on their faces and looked at each other surprised, smiling at this revelation. Had they never heard it before, do we forget to tell the simplest message of the Gospel – God loves you. I would like to think that a seed was certainly planted that day.

That was a great moment to witness the surprise of God’s Love. But, sometimes people simply cannot hear it. Years ago at the Cathedral God gave me a great challenge in the person of Dottie. She would arrive every morning at 6:45 when the doors opened and head for the back of the Chapel to sit by the radiator to get warm. She had grown up at the Cathedral, gotten married, had a good job, had children and

then things began to unravel. She was bipolar; as the mental illness took over she lost everything. When I met her she had been homeless for a couple of years, she didn't even know where her children were. She was in her mid-fifties, small fragile and ill equipped to keep herself safe on the streets. Several of us at the church tried to help her –we would insist she take money and I don't know how but she would pay us back in a few days.

Now it was October, getting colder and I was getting worried about Dottie and about a stray cat living in the bushes at the Cathedral. I found a home for the stray cat – the cat was ecstatic. But Dottie resisted all my efforts for help. She had overextended her days at the various shelters and one night she spent the whole night in a park. That scared her enough to come to me for help. I arranged for her, a place in transitional housing for the homeless. But Dottie refused to accept the minimal deposit unless she could work it off at the Church. We created a job for her, dusting shelves and books in the library. And I required her to meet with me once a week for “spiritual direction.” It enabled me to check if she was taking her meds.

Our first meeting revealed a woman who genuinely loved God and was very knowledgeable about the faith. She told me she heard voices. They usually came through traffic lights. She heard God tell her that she was worthless and had ruined the lives of her ex husband and children. Then she announced she was leaving the studio apartment I had just gotten her because, “It was God's will that she be homeless.”

I nearly jumped out of my chair and very firmly said: “That is not the voice of God you hear, it is the voice of the evil one.” She had come to believe one of the biggest lies – that God wills pain and suffering. I knew it would do no good to tell her that God loved her and cared for – a message that worked so well on the couple I mentioned. So week after week we repeated Good Friday we sat at the foot of the cross. I asked her what Jesus did on the Cross. “He died for us, he forgave us.” Dottie, I said when he was on the Cross did he say “forgive them – oh, except for Dottie.” Dottie wanted to bear her own pain all by herself, when Jesus Christ had already borne it for her. She then realized she would not be honoring our lord if she refused his forgiveness. Slowly, over months of Good Friday's she began to reject the negative voices, realizing they came from her illness. In time she got a real job, a car, she served as an acolyte and best of

all she found her children and discovered she was a grandmother – it was a process but their relationship became restored. When she died of cancer a couple of years ago she was surrounded by loving friends and family.

We do not hear voices as did Dottie. But we are bombarded with messages that attempt to distort and lie about God's gracious intentions toward us. Some of that has even been perpetuated by the Church. But the suffering and death of Jesus reveal a God who does not require sacrifice from us. It was at the foot of the Cross that Dottie discovered God's love in a way that she could finally believe.

There's a great phrase, "The Jesus we see is the God we get." Everything Jesus did and taught, revealed what God was really like. Jesus declared, over and over again that was his main purpose – to reveal God to point to God to glorify God. So on the Cross we must ask ourselves what God did in the sacrificial act of Jesus. It is a lie that God demanded the blood of Jesus, a sacrificial victim in order to grant forgiveness. That's how pagan religions operate – appease the god to get what you want. God didn't require a victim. On the Cross God was there with arms wide open saying to humanity "I love you so much I will be your victim." Jesus, didn't pray on the Cross "God I forgive you for what you are doing to me" but, "forgive them, for they know not what they do."

For Dottie knowing how Jesus suffered opened up the gateway to God's love. It was knowing that on the Cross, Jesus stayed there – he was not afraid to be with us in our pain. He allowed the violence of the fallen nature of humankind to do its worst. He took care of salvation and redemption once and for all. And I think he put suffering in its rightful place.

Jesus revealed a God who suffers with us. By no means does that require us to look for places where we can suffer – that happens on its own. And there is a lot of suffering in the world that seems meaningless – the floods and fires, and the senseless school and public shootings, etc. and we all know people who are not a bit wiser, or stronger because of the trials they have undergone. But for the Christian who suffers the questions are: am I drawing strength from God? Is God revealing something about God's character and love that I never knew before? Am I walking into new territory in my spiritual path with the Lord? Suffering only takes on meaning when we allow the Lord to use it to reveal God's love for us.

God so loved the world and Gave Jesus to us, both in his powerful teachings, in his compassionate love for the forgotten poor. And with the power of the Cross, Jesus took away any excuses we want to make to refuse God's Love, as God embraced our pain once and for all in Jesus. "The Jesus we see is the God we get."