

A Homily preached by
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“Learning to Love”
Epiphany III C, January 27, 2013
Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

My brothers and sisters, I come before you this day, the day of our Annual Meeting of Parishioners “to proclaim the year of the Lord” (Luke 4:19). This is the year of the Lord.

Today we begin a new year in our common life here at St. Andrew’s. The eyes of all those in the synagogue were fixed on Jesus. And he declared to them – and to us – that Scripture – the prophecy of Isaiah – “has been fulfilled” (Luke 4:21). Would that that were so. Would that it were so in all the world. Would that it were so even in our small corner of the world.

Jesus explained to those within his hearing – and we overhear – his mission, borrowed from the scroll of the prophet (Isaiah 58:6 and 61:1-2):

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18-19).

In the Lukan narrative in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles “release” is understood to be release from sins – forgiveness of sins which is essential – essential to a restored relationship with God – and, I dare say, with one another. But Jesus came also – to bring about release from debts. Release from debts here meant release “from relationships characterized by debt and obligation to one’s betters.”¹ The poor could be interpreted to be the spiritually poor or the materially impoverished, but in Luke’s world the poor is best understood as the marginalized because of gender, age, economic destitution, physical malady, or divisions of religion.²

My friends, because Jesus ushered in the year of the Lord, we are released from all our sins and from all our debts. Through Jesus our relationship with God has been restored and our relationships with one another restored as well. There is nothing that can separate us from God. There is nothing that can separate us from one another. Nothing.

How then are we to live now that we have been released from the burdens of broken relationships? Well, that is what I am called to address in my charge on the day of our annual meeting.

We have today the opportunity with this wonderful proclamation by Christ Jesus to have a glimpse of God's will for us. Now I do not presume to know the will of God. If ever I think I know what God would have us do – that I would suppose to know how God would have us live – I recall that I know about as much about God as my dog knows about me. So when thinking about how God might have us live, I have a dog story to share with you told by a veterinarian who had been called to examine a ten-year-old Irish Wolfhound named Belker.

“The dog's owners, Ron, his wife Lisa, and their little boy Shane, were all very attached to Belker, and they were hoping for a miracle. The veterinarian examined Belker and found he was dying of cancer. She told the family that veterinary medicine couldn't do anything for Belker, and offered to perform the euthanasia procedure for the old dog in their home. As they made arrangements, Ron and Lisa told her they thought it would be good for six-year-old Shane to observe the procedure. They felt as though Shane might learn something from the experience. The next day, she felt the familiar catch in her throat as Belker's family surrounded him. Shane seemed so calm, petting the old dog for the last time, that she wondered if he understood what was going on. Within a few minutes, Belker slipped peacefully away. The little boy seemed to accept Belker's transition without any difficulty or confusion. They all sat together for a while after Belker's death, wondering aloud about the sad fact that animals' lives are shorter than human lives.

Shane, who had been listening quietly, piped up, “I know why.”

Startled, they all turned to him. What came out of his mouth next stunned them all. The veterinarian had never heard a more comforting explanation. It has changed the way she tried to live.

Shane said, “People are born so that they can learn how to live a good life -- like loving everybody all the time and being nice, right?” The six-year-old continued, “Well, dogs already know how to do that, so they don’t have to stay as long.”

We humans have to learn to:

Live simply.

Love generously.

Care deeply.

Speak kindly.

Remember, if a dog were the teacher we would learn things like:

When loved ones come home, always run to greet them.

Never pass up the opportunity to go for a joyride.

Allow the experience of fresh air and the wind in your face to be pure ecstasy.

Take naps.

Stretch before rising.

Run, romp, and play daily.

Thrive on attention and let people touch you.

Avoid biting when a simple growl will do.

On warm days, stop to lie on your back on the grass.

On hot days, drink lots of water and lie under a shady tree.

When you're happy, dance around and wag your entire body.

Delight in the simple joy of a long walk.

Be loyal.

Never pretend to be something you’re not.

If what you want lies buried, dig until you find it.

When someone is having a bad day, be silent, sit close by, and nuzzle them gently.

There comes a time in life, when we walk away from all the drama and people who create it. We surround ourselves with people who make us laugh, people who forget the bad and focus on the good. So, love the people who treat us right. Think good thoughts for the ones who don’t.” The veterinarian was echoing Jesus’s when he told us “to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us”³

In contrast to the veterinarian, Martin Luther King, Jr. in his sermon entitled “Loving Your enemies said:” “Now there is a [final] reason I think that Jesus says, “Love your

enemies.” It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they can’t stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they’ll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That’s love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There’s something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies.”⁴

Life is too short to be anything but loving to one another. Dogs were made to love; it is natural for them. They do not have to learn it. But we humans have to learn by experience, and, I think, we learn not so much from our successes as out failures.

Peter Gomes, the late preacher and chaplain to Harvard University who wrote many books, including two of my favorites, *The Good Book* and *The Good Life*, said:

When you are successful you don’t appreciate all ...that went into that success as much as when you’ve gone through failure. When you try something and it doesn’t work, you have a tendency to spend time reflecting.”⁵

In the church as well as in our personal lives, we all have had times of success and times of failure – times when we have gotten it right and also when we have made small and colossal mistakes. I give thanks for times of failure and the opportunity to reflect. I pray to reflect even in our successful times.

My friends, know that you are loved. God loves you and I love you. So I can say with love, falling down is part of life, getting back up is living. Being a Christian means we get back up when we fall – when we fail – because we have been released from all our sins and from our debts. Christ Jesus did that for us.

The good news is that this is the year of the Lord! May we live into the year of the Lord!

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 1989, p. 1860.

² *Ibid.*

³ Matthew 5:44.

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*

⁵ *The Good Life*, Peter Gomes, p. 86.