

I'M LOVIN' IT

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Third Sunday of Easter, April 10, 2016

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Debra Miller joins Art Suggs in a responsive reading as a prelude to the sermon for today. She reads an abstraction from I Corinthians 13: 1-8 on love, while he responds with a more modern commentary on the same subject.

Miller: If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Suggs: This one hits close to home, as it probably should for all clergy — and for politicians too. I can try to be eloquent, turn a phrase, engage in a bit of rhetoric, but this says that eloquence is as so much straw without love. If I don't speak out of my love and God's love for the people right in front of me, it becomes an irritant, a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Miller: If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge . . .

Suggs: Ahh! Now Paul is taking it to the intellectuals and the academics, the Greeks of his day — and likely to most of us. It is a common temptation to substitute knowledge for actual love or service.

Miller: . . . and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

Suggs: Ooo! Sticking it to the conservatives, are we? Those who are of great faith, those who make a task of religion itself, morally upright and “believers” in the right things, often through sheer willpower. This may pass for religion, but it is faith without love and thus is neither true faith nor true love.

Miller: And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

Suggs: Uh oh! Looks like the liberals aren't going to get off easily either. Apparently, you can even be a progressive and generous social activist, but if you're just doing it to be holier than thou or out of oppositional energy, you are still outside the Big Mystery of love.

Miller: Love is patient; love is kind and is not jealous.

Suggs: If I'm jealous, then I'm not in love. When you are inside this mystery of love, you operate differently. It's not in a guarded, protective way but rather in a vulnerable way.

Miller: Love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly . . .

Suggs: . . . it is never rude . . .

Miller: . . . it does not seek its own . . .

Suggs: . . . advantage . . .

Miller: . . . is not provoked . . .

Suggs: . . . It does not take offense or store up grievances. So every time you and I take offense, we're not “in love.” (How many times a day is that?)

Miller: Love does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness . . .

Suggs: . . . in the mistakes of others . . .

Miller: . . . but rejoices with the truth.

Miller: Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Suggs: And then Paul says this: . . .

Miller: . . . Love never fails.

End of responsive reading.

LOVE NEVER FAILS

That Is a Sweeping Statement

And I think there's a good reason for it, which can be found in the Epistle of John, where it's one of those rare but important equations in the Bible: God is love. God *is* love. So love doesn't fail. God doesn't fail.

In my mind it's a little like gravity. You can take an airplane up, you can fly a kite, you can throw a ball up into the air, but by golly, it does come down after a while. Gravity is relentless that way, it just keeps pulling. Like God, like life.

Last weekend I was listening to the radio, and there was an interview with a guy by the name of Peter Singer. Immediately I had it. He was a philosophy professor at Princeton University, but what I had in mind was an interview with Pete Seeger, and it was just not matching up at all. Then I realized no, no, my mind had played a trick on me. It is Peter Singer who is a professor of philosophy at the University of Melbourne in his native Australia. This Australian guy is also a professor of bioethics at Princeton. His book is entitled

The Ethics of Globalization, and he was making a pretty compelling point during the interview. And that's that. Let me offer a quote from Peter Singer:

Morality Requires a World View

“It makes no difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor's child ten yards away from me or a Bangladeshi whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away. The moral point of view requires us to look beyond the interests of our own society. Previously, this may hardly have been feasible, but it is quite feasible now. From the moral point of view, the prevention of the starvation of millions of people outside our society must be considered at least as pressing as the upholding of property norms within our society.” — From *Marxist.com*

What Singer is doing is pointing out that here is a rich society and over there is a poor society, and the rich society often does little or nothing for the poor society. The Communist Manifesto would say the rich need to give as

much as they possibly can until the poor have as much as the rich. But being the good capitalists that we are, we resist such an extreme notion. Rebelling against it, we say, “No way!” finding the excuse that we’re not communists. (By the way, I found this quote on “Marxist.com.” I didn’t know Marxist.com existed as a website on the internet. It has lots of good stuff in it.)

The Drowning Child Is a Lesson For Expanding the Circle

What Singer is saying, though, is that, because of the refusal, in a communist kind of way, to make society completely equal, therefore, we do nothing. We use it as an excuse. But he’s most famous for a book called *The Drowning-Child Analogy and the Expanding Circle*. After a very interesting interview on the radio, I looked this guy up and read more about him. The Drowning-Child Analogy sort of got to me.

Before I was a first-grader, I don’t remember exactly how old I was, my parents visited friends of theirs, who lived in the country. It was wintertime. Apparently I had been bugging my parents, and finally they said, “Little Arthur, you go on outside and play.” So they bundled me up, and out I went to play. The friends’ house was up on a knoll, and if you go down the hill, about 50 yards or so away, you come to a lake. The lake was frozen at this time of year.

So here I am, kindergarten age, plus or minus, checking out the ice, and it seems fine, so I walked out onto the lake and was having a grand time out in the middle on the ice. Over on one side of the lake I spot open water. Well, that looked interesting to explore, so I started walking toward the open water on this frozen lake.

Knowing a Little Is not Enough

It’s fascinating now that in my distant memory of this incident I knew enough as I got close to the open water to get down and crawl on my belly on the ice. I apparently knew enough to realize what to do so that I wouldn’t fall through the ice, but I didn’t know enough not to do it at all.

So I was about ten feet away from the open water, and the ice is getting thinner. But this was unknown to me when suddenly blood-curdling screams arose in the peaceful quiet behind me. My parents and their friends had seen me crawling on the ice toward the open water through a big picture window that overlooked the lake. When they realized the danger to me, panic struck. They ran screaming down to the edge of the lake for me to come back.

Well, when you’re on your stomach, faced away from the house, you can’t really turn to see. So finally I got up on my knees, and I saw all four of them yelling and gesturing wildly at me to come back. So sure enough, you can tell that I lived. I left that thin ice and went back and was told about how thin ice breaks and dumps you in the freezing water. And worse.

Long Distance May Outweigh Hard-Wired Action to Rescue the Poor

The Drowning-Child Analogy is so fearful that, beginning probably in grade school and on up, any older kid, let alone any adult, would without hesitation try to save a drowning child. If you have a child who could drown, picture a lake in either the placid summer or the freezing winter, or watch the surf when it’s roiling, it’s natural, it is hard-wired in that none of us would even entertain the question that, well, whose kid is it? No. We

would try to save the child immediately. And what this philosophy professor is saying is that we have hard-wired within us the desire to save another person, no matter whether elderly or young, no questions asked.

And yet we enter our society where we have people who are poor in this area of the country, people who are diseased in that place in the world, and we find reasons not to help them, largely because they are out of view. And so we say, “No.” Then we go and sleep well that night.

Singer is following up on an idea that Einstein popularized in his later years. It didn’t originate with Einstein at all, but he popularized it, and the spiritual task for all of humanity is to broaden the definition of family or, as in the second part of Singer’s book title, “the Expanding Circle.” Is it just nuclear family? Just extended family? We have church family. We have the world family. Those are often euphemisms, but it is the spiritual task of each person to broaden the circle, to redefine our family. Who is it we’re willing to save?

Long Obedience Requires Long Practice

There’s a famous quote by another philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. A marvelous quote, it’s “the long obedience in the same direction” quote if you’ve heard it before. There’s actually a book with that title, so it’s difficult to research because this very popular book keeps coming up when you google it. But I found it with some effort in a book published in the late 1800’s entitled *The Natural History of Morals*, Chapter 5, Subsection 188. The reason I mention that is because

what he’s talking about in the immediate context of this quote is “The Making of Fine Art.”

“The essential thing ‘in heaven and in earth’ is that there should be a long obedience in the same direction, and thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living: For instance, virtue, art, music, dancing, reason, spirituality — anything whatever that is transfiguring.”

That long obedience is basically practice. It’s doing it again and again and again until you are able to do it well, to do it right, whether the art form is music or painting or dancing. It really doesn’t matter what the art form is, but Nietzsche is saying that our spirituality is also our art form. It is also something that takes practice.

Read the quote just one more time, please:

“The essential thing ‘in heaven and in earth’ is that there should be a long obedience in the same direction, and thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living: For instance, virtue, art, music, dancing, reason, spirituality — anything whatever that is transfiguring.”

And so my point this morning is to transfigure our world, to transfigure our lives. We need to close the gap that Singer, the philosophy professor, was talking about between the need of the world and what we are able to do: To close that gap and to make our love our fine art.

Amen.