

Pentecost 21B (10/14/2018)
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Psalm 90:1-2, 12-17
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

Love comes first. Before we become consciously aware of the vulnerability and pain inherent in created existence, God makes us God's own and embraces us with enduring love. God is our home – our refuge, our shelter, our belonging place – in and through the trials we are certain to face. In holy baptism, God gathers us up into Jesus' own life, binding us to others in love and turning us loose to splash that love, like water from the font, wherever we go.

Parenthood is an ongoing exercise in vulnerability. No matter how fiercely we desire to protect our children, parents know in our hearts that we cannot shield them from the pain and loss inherent in created existence. Somehow, the experience of meeting our children for the first time has a way of sharpening this sense of vulnerability, arousing both unrestrained love for the little person looking up at us for the first time and a profound, helpless awareness of the fragility of life.

In her recent memoir, Kate Bowler reflects on her own mortality in light of parenthood, juxtaposing the joy of bearing her first child with the devastation of receiving a stage IV cancer diagnosis at age thirty-five:

I have started writing letters to [my son] Zach in the quiet between naps, hospital visits, and my earnest sister-in-law fussing over how to get me to eat. Zach can sit on the bed with me, but mostly he wants to roll around, and he can't touch the tender [surgical] stitches across my stomach. Not touching him is exhausting. Time has started to feel like it's getting away from us. When he gets older, will he know how I felt the moment they put him in my arms? *There was nothing like it, Zach. The nurses said that when our eyes met, I kept repeating, "It was you. It was you the whole time."*

I used to think that grief was about looking backward, old men saddled with regrets or young ones pondering should-haves. I see now that it is about eyes squinting through tears into an unbearable future. The world cannot be remade by the sheer force of love. A brutal world demands capitulation to what seems impossible—separation. Brokenness. An end without an ending.¹

The hard truth is that there is no security in this life – neither for ourselves nor for our loved ones – only the veneer of security. There is no promise of rescue from heartbreak. Parenthood has made me all too conscious of that.

The fact of our vulnerability, however, doesn't shake the conviction at the heart of our faith, the conviction that overflows the baptismal font and carries us, like a stream, out the doors of this place into each new day of our delicate lives. So, taking my cue from Kate Bowler, on Simon's baptism day, I'll make an effort to express that conviction by writing him a letter. Of course, it's a letter for you, too.

Dear Simon,

Love comes first. Your mom swears that she knew you deep down even before you arrived. Before we got a look at your face, before we could begin to imagine who you'd be and what you might become, we loved you.

There's no perfect metaphor for God, but one of the most familiar is that of a parent. God is "our Father, our Mother in heaven, hallowed be your name." If that metaphor means nothing else, it means that God's love comes first. God knew you deep down before you arrived. And today, well before you become

¹ *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, 70.

consciously aware of the ways life on Earth can be frightening, painful, and lonely, God has made you God's own and embraced you with enduring love.

The psalm assigned for the day of your baptism is Psalm 90. It's an honest prayer, brave enough to admit how fragile life is, but also faithful enough to profess trust in God despite all the bad things that happen in the world. "Lord, you have been our refuge," the psalmist sings, "from one generation to another." This gets at the heart of what your baptism means to me. God is your home – your refuge, your shelter, your belonging place² – in and through the trials you are certain to face. In other words, God's love comes first, and you belong to God, no matter where your life's journey takes you.

What's more, God's love is meant to shape you into the person God intends you to be. The world will offer you a thousand alternatives. *You should be beautiful and talented and successful and wealthy*, the world will whisper in your ear every day, *otherwise, what is the significance of your life?* This is why the rich man is so sad when Jesus tells him to sell what he owns, and give the money to the poor, and follow. The man has everything he's ever wanted, yet he is lacking in one thing: the courage to relinquish his grip on all that he has acquired for himself – material proof that his life has value according to the world's standards – and entrust himself to relationship, "a relationship with Jesus, and therefore, identity known in and because of community."³

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 111.

³ Karoline Lewis, "What Do You Lack?" <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5232>.

There's a reason dozens of people showed up for your baptism today. The love of God is not some abstract thing; it's not just an idea. God's love shows up in the pledges of solidarity you receive today from your mom and me, your godparents, your grandparents, your aunts and uncles, your friends, and your congregation, yes, and in the ways your people will bind themselves to you throughout your life. When you celebrate, to paraphrase the Apostle Paul, they will celebrate with you; when you suffer, they will suffer with you.⁴

And, even as the love of God joins others to you, it will also join you to others, especially to the ones who need you the most – people who are hurting, who are in need, whose hearts are broken. Your baptism is a sign for all the world to see, the sign that God has gathered you up with all the saints into Jesus' own life, binding you to them in love and turning you loose to splash that love, like water from the font, wherever you go.

So, wade in the water, Simon, delight in it today and all the days of your life. God loves you no matter what, and so do I.

- Dad

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:26.