

**“God Loves”**  
**Luke 13:31-31**  
**Rev. Andrew Connors**  
**2nd Sunday in Lent**  
**March 14, 2022**

It was the city that disappointed him. The city, with a habit of rejecting prophets sent to it, according to Luke. Luke makes that point several times. The most outrageous case of this prophet rejection was back in the book of 2 Chronicles when Zechariah ben Jehoida was stoned to death at the command of the king on the very mount of the temple. Two hundred years later in the time of Jeremiah, the prophet Uriah ben Shenaiah was executed by another king for preaching the same justice that the prophet Jeremiah would go onto preach.

Of course the murders of prophets aren't unique to Jerusalem. The powerful are always looking for ways to silence the voices of those trying to bring the people to a more just place. Dr. King, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy, JFK, Fred Hampton - all murdered here in this country for the threats their voices posed in the public sphere. Archbishop Romero assassinated in El Salvador. Steve Biko killed in South Africa. Putin's opposition poisoned long before he launched a war into a territory whose people had publicly rejected his reign with their votes. Jamal Khashoggi murdered by a Saudi prince for writing the truth. Salman Rushdie had a fatwa on his head for writing his version of the truth. This is where power can lead and has led many times when left unchecked.

Jerusalem's prophet persecution record isn't unique. What's different about Jerusalem is just that Jesus loved it so much. It's not that he was an urbanite. I doubt he had an "I love city life" pin on his lapel. He loved it, as far as I can tell, like other Jews love Jerusalem. The place where his people are promised to dwell in love and harmony because God promises to dwell with them. Jerusalem is more than a location on a map. It is a vision for human hope and human promise. The city of Shalom - of wellbeing. Jesus loved Jerusalem because he believed in its promises. He hoped in its hope.

And so Jesus gets angry. He's angry, first, with Herod - that fox, because Herod is the one out to get him. And Herod is the one who killed John the Baptist. The puppet king for the Romans. It's validating to see Jesus get angry with a person responsible in his time and his place for injustice in the land. It's good to see him go after public accountability of the one in power who can make a change. But Jesus' anger moves from Herod to Jerusalem probably because even where there is a tyrant there must be people around him to allow that kind of power to go unchecked. Most public atrocities are carried out with the assistance of others. There was no Hitler without a people to

cheer him on. There could be no Putin without wealthy autocrats who at least until this war, benefitted from his take no prisoner policies. There could be no slavery in this country with the consent of preachers and politicians and bankers and lawyers and ordinary people like you and me.

Even today, there is homelessness because, in part, we allow it. There are entire neighborhoods in Baltimore scarred by vacants and poverty and unemployment because, in part, we allow it. There is police brutality because we refuse, finally to hold all departments accountable. Jesus turns his focus from the personal to the communal because we are all tangled up in it. Jesus gets angry - the natural human response to felt injustice. Anger - that emotion that when rightly calibrated, is the barometer of right and wrong.

Jesus gets angry over Jerusalem. Yet six chapters later that anger turns to tears (Luke 19:41-42). I'm not sure why the change of heart. Some say anger is a way to feel powerful in the midst of the powerlessness of loss - of having something or someone taken from you. Others say anger covers up grief; protects people who are afraid of looking weak or vulnerable from having to face those more frightening feelings. I wonder if Jesus moves from anger to grief because he recognizes how easy it is for anger to metastasize into something that eats away at you from the inside, drying out the well of love, whose loss first gave rise to the anger.

It's that well of love that brings Jesus to tears both times it's mentioned in the New Testament. Once, while standing at the tomb of his beloved friend, Lazarus. Weeping over his loss. And later entering the city of Jerusalem, weeping over its way in the world. It's love that evokes those kinds of tears. Love over that errant child that you've tried so hard to help get on the right path without complete success. Love is what makes you hurt so bad. Love over that lost relationship that you thought would last longer than it did - it's love that brings those tears. Love over that grandparent whose death shakes your confidence, your core - the person who was always there for you.

It's love underneath that anger. It's love underneath those tears.

Now, if you are the one on the receiving end of those tears, you might miss that critical part. "My mother's always disappointed in me." "My lover never thinks I measure up." "My child never feels supported enough."

It's easy to see Jesus' anger turned to grief, only to miss the love that is at the root of it. Love as a mother hen has for her brood under her wings. A desire to embrace, to nurture, to hold. To be mothered by Jesus, as Julien of Norwich wrote between the 14th and 15th centuries: "Christ is our mother, brother and savior," she wrote. "Our natural mother, our gracious mother, because he willed to become our mother in everything, took the ground for his work most humbly and most mildly in the

maiden's womb... A mother can give her child milk to suck, but our precious mother, Jesus, can feed us with himself."<sup>1</sup>

The Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney, a womanist theologian writing on this passage says that some of us are unwilling to be mothered by Jesus.<sup>2</sup> We are unwilling because we've inherited or adopted chauvinistic ideas about the manhood of Jesus. Or we're unwilling because we'll only follow the Jesus who mirrors back to us our own notions of what justice looks like, our own notions of what fairness looks like. Or we're unwilling to be mothered by Jesus because we've never been mothered in loving ways ourselves.

Yet if we could know that love it could change everything. Maybe that sounds a little too much like psycho-babble to do much more than change our sense of ourselves.

But David Brooks argues this week that social psychology has been more helpful in understanding what's happening in Ukraine right now than international relations. "The war in Ukraine is not primarily about land," he writes. "It's primarily about status. Putin invaded so Russians could feel they are a great nation once again and so Putin himself could feel that he's a world historical figure along the lines of Peter the Great." The root of this desire, Brooks writes, is rooted in an identity politics built on humiliation and shame. "Like other identity politicians around the world," Brooks says, "[Putin] promoted status resentment to soothe the wounds of trauma, the fears of inferiority." Imagine if there was something stronger than such narcissism at work in the heart of this man.<sup>3</sup>

"The end of the Soviet Union could have been seen as a liberation, a chance to build a new and greater Russia. But Putin chose to see it as a catastrophic loss, one creating a feeling of helplessness and a shattered identity. Who are we now? Do we matter anymore?" The real problem, Books says, is that Putin only knows one way to deal with this humiliation, "which is by blaming others and lashing out."<sup>4</sup> Imagine if that anger had been nurtured into grief. A grief that reflected a genuine love for a people instead of an anger that consumes them in the process.

That's the love we see in Jesus angering then lamenting over Jerusalem. Not a love that hardens into blaming others and lashing out. But one that deepens into courage, resistance to what is evil, and embrace of life in its honest and generous forms.

I'd say it is a love that we need to deepen to deal with our own sense of humiliation as a city. Or perhaps I'd say it's one you might deepen as one who has

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted without citation by the Rev. Wil Gafney, Ph.D., "Christ Our Mother," <https://www.wilgafney.com/2016/02/21/christ-our-mother/>. Brought to my attention by *A Sanctified Art* in their Lenten series, "Full to the Brim."

<sup>2</sup> "Christ Our Mother, the Rev. Wil Gafney, Ph.D., <https://www.wilgafney.com/2016/02/21/christ-our-mother/>. Brought to my attention by *A Sanctified Art* in their Lenten series, "Full to the Brim."

<sup>3</sup> David Brooks, "This Is Why Putin Can't Back Down," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/10/opinion/putin-ukraine-russia-identity.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

been wronged or will be wronged by someone or something or some injustice in the world. But love is never a self-improvement project because it's not a skill, or even a virtue to be developed as much as it is a reality to rest in. A reality to acknowledge, to touch, celebrate and share. A love that sends prophets into cities to announce a better way. A love that shapes a people through all the losses of time and history. A love that breathes its way into the world in Jesus. Love who comes to mother us whether we respond in kind or not. To know that love - to rest in that love - means everything.

Not an anemic, sentimental love, but the one that combines the tough mindedness (in the words of Dr. King), with tenderheartedness. It's that love that gives prophets the strength to love like Jesus all the way through the deathly powers of Golgatha. All the way through that lonesome valley resisting fear and hate without letting it destroy him in the process. "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate," Dr. King wrote in *Strength to Love*, "adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."<sup>5</sup>

Maya Angelou was speaking to Oprah Winfrey one time about a book with the line "God loves me" printed in it. "When I came to read it to my then mentor. . ." she explained, "he said, 'read it again.'" I said, 'God loves me.' He said, 'read it again. Read it again.' And finally I said, 'God. Loves. Me.'" In the interview, Maya Angelou is suddenly overcome. This giant of a woman is bent over with emotion, and with tears visible on her face she tells Oprah, "It still humbles me. That this force, which made leaves and fleas and stars and rivers and you, loves me. Me, Maya Angelou. *That's amazing*. I can do anything and do it well. Any good thing, I can do it. That's why I'm who I am. Yes. Because God loves me and I'm amazed at it. And grateful for it!"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love*, in *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins), 1986. Note I pulled these ideas more or less from my memory of Dr. King's writings. Later, I realized that the quote is actually from a sermon on nonviolence from Dexter Avenue Baptist back in 1957. Nevertheless it is published in *Strength to Love*.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBuEIFiJpsc> Brought to my attention by A Sanctified Art in their Lenten series, "Full to the Brim."