

Sermon: Love Around the Backstretch

Scripture: Acts 1:1-11

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There is something that I find poignant about the Ascension, that moment in the story of Jesus when after all of his resurrection appearances but before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, He departs once again from the disciples. They are out on the Mount of Olives with Him and they've been on cloud 9, we imagine, for weeks now because the one they thought they'd lost to death had actually returned to life. And now He's leaving again and they do not know why and they are not clear on what exactly happens next to Jesus, to them, to the world.

I guess the truth of the matter is that rarely are we ever as clear as we'd like to be on what happens next. Who was it? Kirkegaard who said "Life can only be understood backwards but must be lived forward." And from the perspective of faith, that living forward must be done with trust, with faith, that some larger plan is unfolding, that some greater power than our own has things under control, no matter how out of control and lost we might feel.

And so, much to their chagrin, the disciples are told to wait and to trust. Jesus says to them "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." This makes the disciples only more confused. They try to put what he is saying into categories that they can understand, which in this case is what they heard from their Hebrew scriptures and so they say to Him— "wait, wait, wait, so...does this mean you are going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?" in other words "Is this the fulfillment of all time that we have been waiting for? You *are* going to fix

everything, right, before you leave us, you are going to bring about peace among nations, justice for the oppressed, sight for the blind and all that good stuff you promised, right?”

Jesus responds with love in his heart for them: “it is not for you to know the times or the periods for such things. Just wait and you will receive...” “But, but...” and Jesus ascends into heaven, the scriptures says, and they all stand there alone in the silence looking up into the sky.

The one who was so suddenly alive to them and restored their hope is gone again. And what are they supposed to do? Go on about their business? Go on into the bustling city where everybody is just carrying on their lives as though nothing has happened? They are supposed to wait, for what? And they stand there looking up into the sky... until two figures in robes of white say “hellooo...men of Galilee, why are you standing looking up into the sky? Scoot along now to Jerusalem. You will see, your lives now become His life and His life becomes your life.”

It’s true whenever we lose anyone to death, isn’t it? The life of the beloved departed, through that love, becomes our life, the love born of that relationship is woven into the very fibers of our own living. If this is so in our own human relationships where love is inevitably tainted by our frailty, sin, and woundedness, how much more, of course, would it be the case in a relationship where Love is pure and untainted as in the case of Jesus Christ, Love’s embodiment?

On Ascension Sunday last year I was preaching in Billerica for the search committee and I shared in that sermon a story I’d like to share with you as well so the search committee will have to forgive me for repeating myself. Our eldest daughter, Haliana, runs track for Brandeis and she used to run for her high school up in Vermont called CVU. A few springs ago, on my 43rd birthday actually, I went to her track meet at their rival high school

in Essex Jct. VT. Mid-way through the track meet the announcer came over the loud speaker and asked all the athletes to finish what they were doing and gather along the front stretch for a special presentation. As I walked over from where I was watching the meet and into the stands, I noticed the boys and girls lacrosse teams filing from their fields into the track area and joining with the track teams to flank the front stretch. All the parents and others spectators joined me into the stands. I assumed it was some kind of award presentation for seniors or something.

Once we had all gathered, the announcer came over the loud speaker again and quieted everyone down. He said that the Essex track team wanted to take a moment to remember and honor a student named Bradley Nadeau who had died the previous Saturday at the age of 17 in a car accident and that he would have been running that day in the 4X100. The silence that fell amidst all those people was profound and in it Brad's 3 teammates walked out onto the track and took their places intermittently at a 100 meter intervals along the track to run the 4X100 without him.

The official called out “runners, on your mark... set...” and pulled the trigger of the gun. The shot cracked into the silence and the first runner took off. The pounding of his footsteps was the only thing that could be heard in the stadium. He sprinted around the bottom bend and passed the baton to the next runner who sprinted in the silence down the back stretch to the third runner who took the baton and ran around the top of the track to where Brad would have been waiting to run the last 100. There the runner stopped and put the baton on the ground while he waited for his other two teammates to catch up with him. They hugged one another, picked up the baton again and walked the last 100, down the home stretch, while the other Essex students began filing onto the track behind them. We in the stands we stunned and kept silence as we watched them all cross the finish line, gather into a group

and pass the baton off to Brad's parents. Before the announcer called for the track meet to continue and while everyone was gathering their composure from this profound tribute that had just taken place, I was struck by the sight of the digital clock that timed the run ticking it's milliseconds and seconds and minutes onward just above the heads of the quiet grieving crowd.

Love is not an easy thing. It makes the ones who love deeply vulnerable. It's why at times we choose to limit our love for one another, because of the hurt that necessarily accompanies love in this world. But it is also the only force capable of transcending our limits, our fear, our time, and finally death itself. Of course Jesus had to depart and of course his going was not the end of the story. Of course we all must go some day and of course it won't be the end of the story. But in the meantime we wait and trust and do the next best thing we know how.

The disciples walked silently back into Jerusalem comforting one another in this second loss of Jesus and in the bafflement of "what comes next". And though answers and explanations and clarity did not necessarily come – there was never this – "Oh I get it!" moment – there was what happened next that drew all of the what had come before into a way forward that they never could have dreamed or imagined as time continued to click by and the world's future raced forward. The work for them (and the same for us) was always to do the next best thing they knew how to do and to trust the rest to God whose love birthed all this and is the destination towards which all of this is going... in Jesus' name, Amen.