



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 7 (A)

[RCL] Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad

It is time for Jesus to depart from his disciples, those people who have been with him through thick and thin. Throughout our lives, we have times when we have to let go of loved ones, even when we wish we had more time together. Jesus is leaving his adopted family, the ones he cares for like a parent.

He knows them intimately. He knows them well enough to understand how quickly they can stray off course, fight with one another, and make a mess of many things. He loves them despite all their foibles, their pettiness, their greed, jealousy, and selfish ways. Human, like us, Jesus prayed for them as one who loved them completely and ached for them to have good productive lives and ministry. He wanted them to get beyond their differences and work together for the good of the world.

Like Jesus, we make a constant prayer for those we love: that they are protected and cared for when we are away from them. Parents care deeply for their children, no matter their age or situation; they pray for their safety and their thriving. Parents rejoice publicly as their children go off on their own to college and work, privately weeping and praying when they have to let their grown offspring go.

The relationship between Jesus and his disciples was loving and supportive, yet also fraught with internal struggles and betrayals. They were just like us, completely human, sometimes selfish, and often misguided. We refer to the disciples as “saints,” but probably that was not what Jesus thought of them, nor did their friends and family. They surely did not think of themselves that way. When we love others completely, we are fully aware of their faults; we know how they have been hurt and remember how they have hurt us. Despite all of that, we love them for who they are, as best we can.

In 1972, Judith Viorst wrote a wonderful book for children, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. She was a mother with three young boys and made them characters in this book. It is a favorite for many simply because it is a real story about real challenges and real love. Often, those who write and work with children are the best theologians, because they live in the real world and are not hidden away in academia. Even those of us who love to study and learn can understand that. And often too, children are our best teachers and theologians.

Judith Viorst did not have the luxury of working from home via internet when her boys were young in the 1970s and 80s. She had to handle a load of housework, her wild boy children and her work as a psychologist outside the home. She has often spoken and written about the gritty reality of life's challenges, with much humor and candor. There is a deep intimacy and love that is made real in all her works. She does not shy away from the challenges, messiness, and failures she has faced. She talks about life and love fully lived.

Alexander, the focus of this particular book, has two brothers, Anthony and Nick. On this particular day, everything possible goes wrong for Alexander. He goes to bed with gum in his mouth and wakes up with gum in his hair. Things go downhill from there. He gets no plastic toy in his cereal, no dessert in his lunch and gets the most uncool pair of shoes at the shoe store. As the day goes on, Alexander threatens to move to Australia just to get away from his troubles.

We all have days when our best efforts turn sour, and we feel as if we need to run away and start over elsewhere. Although Alexander's troubles may seem small compared to the state of the world—and the realities of grown-up existence—we can relate to his unvarnished feelings of failure and defeat. When things overwhelm us, we can feel like scared little kids—something the disciples knew all too well.

In today's passage from John, we hear Jesus praying for his disciples as a parent or partner might. He pours so much love and concern into this tender prayer. He knows he is going away forever and he cannot be with them every day anymore. His time with them is limited to a few hours or days at the most. One can imagine that even the risen Jesus did not want to leave his disciples, for fear of calamity and fighting. To understand Jesus as a parent, teacher, and guardian, it is important to think on those people who parented, guarded, and taught us. It is helpful, too, to remember that although Jesus was fully human, he was also fully divine, carrying the weight of the Creator's love for the whole world. Since we might never be able to fully fathom that, we can be helped by recalling those people who are icons of the best love and care we have received.

We learn from our Acts reading (Acts 1:6-14) that after Jesus had ascended, leaving the disciples on their own staring up into heaven, the group gathered in the upper room and devoted themselves to prayer in community. They were afraid and clung to each other, supporting each other as they found ways to get through the days. They waited, not knowing how long they could hang on and what exactly they should do, going forward. They had lost their teacher and were terrified that they might be next to be arrested and crucified. We also know from the letters of Paul and others that squabbles and disagreements broke out among the early Christian communities. The disciples in the upper room had not yet experienced Pentecost; they were not yet filled with the Holy Spirit. At this point, they were hanging on by a thread. They were having some terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days.

We all have had terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days. We seek comfort and support in such times from friends and family. We privately suffer and sometimes we choose destructive ways to find temporary comfort. Drugs and alcohol provide a temporary fix, but never provide an adequate solution or comfort. The character Inigo Montoya from *The Princess Bride*, portrayed by Mandy Patinkin, complains of "humiliations galore!" We all can relate to that feeling. As he seeks revenge on the man who brutally killed his father, we learn about true love while plots and chase scenes continue. "Death cannot stop true love. It can only delay it awhile." The love of Christ is more than romantic love—it's an abiding love that is with us

in every moment, good or bad, glorious or humiliating. God is love and, in this prayer that Jesus prayed before his ascension, we too are held and wrapped in God's unending, unrelenting love. Sometimes, when things are really bad, "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day" bad, it can help to remember songs and hymns that bring us comfort and peace in troubled times. One of the old standards from the Hymnal 1982 brings many a quiet peace in troubled times.

"What wondrous love is this, oh my soul, oh my soul, what wondrous love is this,
that caused the Lord of bliss, to lay side his crown for my soul, for my soul, to lay aside his
crown for my soul." – #439

This ancient melody and its words remind us of Christ's sacrificial and eternal love for us, for our ancestors, and for all those who will follow after us.

Jesus prayed for his disciples—and he prays for us—even in our darkest hour. May we rejoice for this love so deep that death cannot stop it. Nothing can stop us from being surrounded by and embraced in the love of Christ.

Amen.

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