
Astonished by What We Do for Love

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year C**

Thirteen years ago I was mistakenly thought to be the bishop of Atlanta. Here's how it happened.

I was helping to bless the runners on the 4th of July. It was the Peachtree Road Race here in Atlanta, and since the late 1970s that has become the largest 10K race in the world.

But in the late 1990s our Episcopal Cathedral here in Atlanta got into the act. It was 1999, and that year the 4th of July fell on a Sunday. Now some of the churches complained that it would severely complicate Sunday morning worship services all along Peachtree Road. But rather than cursing the race—so to speak—Dean Candler of the Cathedral had the inspired idea of blessing the runners instead. And so he began the annual ritual of flinging holy water at them from a bowl in his hands as they passed by right in front of the church. And he also arranged for a large shower hose to hang over the street spraying those runners with holy water who ran under it.

Now that actually reminds me of today's first reading for today: "During the night Paul had a vision," the reading begins.

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

When he had seen the vision—[the reading continues]—we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. (Acts 16:9-11)

That's right, our Cathedral blessing of the runners every 4th of July began as a spiritual vision—as a visionary way of 'proclaiming good news' as the race passes by a church on that day. The good news, as Dean Candler says the Church is charged to proclaim, is that God welcomes and blesses all people 'whosoever' and whenever and however we show up in the world. So on that inconvenient Sunday back in 1999 we began doing that—doing something we would not otherwise have done if we had not been so inspired—"being convinced," as today's reading says, "being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news:" the good news, I repeat, that God welcomes and blesses all people 'whosoever' and whenever and however we show up in the world.

But I interrupted my story to say all that—my story about how I was mistakenly thought to be the bishop of Atlanta. So the Cathedral started blessing the Road Race runners in 1999. And by thirteen years later, in 2012, the blessing of the runners had become a popular attraction at the Road Race. It was being covered by our city newspaper, the Atlanta Journal Constitution, the annual sponsor of the race, and by local news stations. But that particular year was also the year that our current bishop, Rob Wright, became the first African American bishop here in the Episcopal diocese of Atlanta. In fact, Bishop Rob was elected in June of 2012, one month before the Peachtree Road Race occurred on the 4th of July.

But also that year, the General Convention of the national Episcopal church was meeting in Indianapolis. So Bishop Rob, along with Dean Candler, were away at convention that 4th of July. And instead of the dean blessing the runners, I and the other Cathedral clergy were assigned to substitute.

So picture this: there I was, one among four priests on the sidewalk that day—two white guys, George Maxwell and Wallace Marsh, and one other African American priest. Now that other was a woman—our colleague

Carolynne Williams. So I was the only black dude wearing a white clergy collar around my neck. And because our new bishop had just been elected a month before, any number of well-wishers running past the Cathedral wanted to congratulate him. Seeing me in a collar, they mistakenly called out, "Congratulations bishop Wright!"

And there I was, confronted with a choice. In the few seconds as those people were racing by I could—yes I could have—opted to try to correct their mistake. 'Duh . . . but . . . I'm not . . . You see, he's . . . I'm really just . . .' And, yeah, I could have tried to shout out something like that. But you know what I did instead. Yes, you guessed it. "Thank you," I shouted back instead. "Thank you; Praise God; Glory to God; Thanks be to God!" was what I said again and again.

That's right. In that moment, given the seconds of time granted to me as each of them mistook me for our bishop, I decided that the graceful thing to do was to impersonate our bishop. 'To the glory of God!' Well, what would you have done?

Now, as a matter of fact, I continue to believe that was the right choice—the graceful and grace-filled choice—to make that day. And there are mundane, practical reasons, like the one I just declared. But there are deeper reasons as well. Here's one. In our tradition, priests serve as representatives of their bishop. Because a bishop can't be everywhere, their apostolic role is distributed to priests who represent them in their absence. But that vicarious representation that priests are privileged to convey is really just a special case. It's a special case of the way that all disciples of Christ are 'vicars' of Christ: representatives of the One who chooses us to be present in all the places wherever we find ourselves every day.

That's why Jesus says in today's gospel reading (John 14:24):

Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them (vs. 24a).

And then he concludes:

. . . and the word that you hear is not mine but is from the Father who sent me (vs. 24b).

So just as Jesus acknowledged himself as a messenger sent by his heavenly Father, so his followers are sent. We likewise are sent by Jesus and the Father who promise to make their home with us.

That's also why we have the apostle Paul in today's first reading responding to a vision from a man in Macedonia asking for help. He was responding as a disciple who knows that he has been sent; sent as a representative—a vicar of Christ; sent to be an agent of the One who sent him.

But now, church friends and friends of Christ, here's an astonishing development: Jesus promises that he and God will make their home with us! We heard that same astounding promise last Sunday, as Dean Candler highlighted that verse from the Book of Revelation that reads:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and be their God. (Revelation 21:3)

Yes, I'm astonished by what's happening in our scriptures and in the world today. I'm astonished by signs of a future emerging, when all people will be blessed to be at home with God. And what a blessing to anticipate as we near the end of this year's tumultuous Easter season—these great fifty days of celebrating and meditating on the miracle of resurrection. As we approach the sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost in two weeks from today, may we also become heralds of such good news: the good news that by his life, death and resurrection our Savior has overcome death, sin, and hell so that we too might proclaim and manifest resurrection to all who come under our influence.

That's why, in our Collect for today, we declare that 'such good things have been prepared for us who love God; such good things that surpass our understanding.' And in that collective prayer we say directly to God, 'be pleased to pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire.'

Now let me conclude with one way that I believe that our collective prayer is being fulfilled today.

After writing his 2009 book, *The Empathic Civilization*, the author Jeremy Rifkin seized upon one of the major

news stories from 2010: [another devastating earthquake in Haiti](#). Commenting of the global response to Haiti's catastrophe, Rifkin observed the great outpouring of aid and humanitarian response.

Indeed, Rifkin's description of the world's response to Haiti's earthquake reminds me again of the apostle Paul's response to a vision of a man in Macedonia pleading with him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts. 16:9). In 2010 instead of visions it was tweets and videos, Rifkin observed.

Frantic tweets and videos have been seeping out of Haiti, pleading for help from the rest of the human race in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake that leveled one of the poorest countries on the planet, spreading destruction and death.

The response by people all over the world has been immediate. Governments, NGOs, and individuals are mobilizing relief missions, and social websites are lighting up, as the collective human family extends a global empathic embrace to its neighbors in this small Caribbean nation. We saw a similar global response in the wake of Hurricane Katrina that devastated New Orleans and the gulf coast of the United States and the giant tsunami that struck Asian and African coastlines earlier in the decade.

In recent years, whenever natural disasters have struck, in what is increasingly becoming a globally interconnected and interdependent world, human beings have come together as an extended family in an outpouring of compassion and concern. For these brief moments of time, we leave behind the many differences that divide us to act as a species. We become *Homo empathicus*.

Yet, when faced with similar tragedies that are a result of human-induced behavior, rather than precipitated by natural disasters, we are often unable to muster the same collective empathic response . . .

The question [Rifkin asks] is: why?

[Why is it that] unexpected natural disasters quickly arouse our attention . . . [but] we are unable to respond to human induced suffering with the same emotional and cognitive focus [?] . . . The problem [is that] . . . When human induced behavior results in suffering to others on a large scale, we tend to shrug our shoulders as if to say, "that's human nature and therefore, there's not much we can do about it." That's because we have come to think of human nature as essentially selfish. Our beliefs have become a self-fulfilling prophecy . . .

At the dawn of the modern market economy and the nation-state era, the philosophers of the Enlightenment argued that human beings are autonomous agents, and are detached, rational, and driven by material self-interest and utilitarian pursuits.

But, is that who we really are? [Rifkin asks.]

Instead of the survival of the fittest, he argues that "empathic consciousness has grown steadily over history."

[Our ancestors, he writes] only extended primitive empathic distress to their immediate blood relatives and extended family. With the rise of the world's great religions, empathic consciousness extended to those of like-minded religious affiliation. Jews empathized with Jews, Christians with Christians, Muslims with Muslims, etc. In the modern market economy and nation-state era, the empathic embrace extended to people sharing a common national identity. American empathized with Americans, Germans with Germans, Japanese with Japanese, etc.

Today, distributed information and communication technologies are bringing together the entire human race in an extended family. Is it so difficult, then, to imagine a leap to biosphere consciousness and the extension of empathy to our species as a whole and to the other creatures that cohabit this planet with us?

With that secular humanist vision in mind, Rifkin draws the following conclusion

Now we need to prepare the groundwork for an empathic civilization that is compatible with our core nature. This will require a rethinking of parenting styles, reforming our educational system, reinventing our business models, and transforming our governing institutions so that the way we live our lives is attuned to and, in accord with, our fundamentally empathic nature.

Lest we think this is an impossible task, consider again the global empathic outpouring for the victims of

the Haitian earthquake. Then ask, why we can't harness that same global empathic embrace, not only to rescue victims of natural disasters, but also to raise generations of empathic global citizens who can live together in relative peace and harmony in a biosphere world.

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-earthquake-that-trigg_b_424978

Now with that vision in mind, let's return one last time to today's scripture from the Book of Acts. Recall the fact that the apostle Paul was a Jew and that the Macedonians were gentile non-Jews. So here we see the apostle crossing ethnic and cultural boundaries, as well as geographic and national boundaries, to respond to a call for help as if he were responding to a call of God.

And here, in conclusion, I'm reminded of one of my favorite pop songs: the classic love song from 1978 by Bobby Caldwell, "What You Won't Do for Love." "What you won't do, do for love," Caldwell sings.

What you won't do, do for love.
You've tried everything but you won't give up.

And then he ends with the lines that I think apply as well to God as it applies to any lover. So I hear it sometimes as a declaration that each of us is saying to God as our divine lover.

In my world, only you make me do for love what I would not do;
Make me do for love what I would not do;
Make me do for love what I would not do;
Make me do for love what I would not do.

Yes, here we have the kind of declaration that that Jesus himself prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night that he was betrayed into the hands of our human sin: "Abba, Father," he prayed.

Abba Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.
(Mark 14:36)

And with that high standard of Jesus' love for us, let us conclude with our own struggles with love and empathy as well: the real experiences we all share that—for the sake of love—we find ourselves doing things that we would not otherwise do; doing what we would not do if it were not for love. Let us consider, even more, in these tumultuous weeks, months, and years ahead, how astounding will be the ways that the Holy Spirit is empowering more and more people among us to 'do for love what we would not otherwise do.'

Yes, let us pray, may more and more among us 'do for love what we would not otherwise do.'

Yes, let there be more and more among us 'do for love what we would not otherwise do.'

More and more among us doing for love what we would not otherwise do. Amen.