

Serve with Love
A Sermon on John 13:31-35 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ May 15, 2022

10 years ago the congregation I served in Casper, Wyoming held a church retreat. We went out of the city for the retreat, and our entire building was empty for the weekend.

There was one group of people who were not very happy about our church retreat. It didn't take long for me to hear about it. I was in my office on the Monday following the retreat. I was surprised to see a woman I had met only once or twice before, standing at my office door. Let's call her Brenda. Brenda was the leader of the AA group that met every Saturday at St. Mark's. Brenda was not happy.

Brenda was upset because the AA group had been locked out of the building on Saturday morning. They arrived at the church at their normal time, 9 a.m., but the door was locked. As Brenda told her story I realized the altar guild always unlocked the kitchen door when they arrived at 8:30 each Saturday morning. That was how the AA group entered the church building for their meeting. I apologized, "I am so sorry. We were holding our church retreat this weekend, so everyone was away. I forgot to tell you we wouldn't be here. I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

To my surprise, Brenda became even more upset. "Inconvenience?! You don't understand. This is not a matter of convenience for our members. This is a matter of life and death. We have to meet each Saturday. Some of our members have to attend an AA meeting every day in order to survive. If we don't meet with our AA groups we might lose everything we have gained from years and years of recovery."

This is a matter of life and death. We have to meet each week. We have to be here. The twelve step people understand. They understand what is most important for them to do. What is most important for us to do? What is the one thing that turns us away from death? What is the one thing that brings new life to us?

Jesus points us toward the one thing that brings new life. Jesus said, Little children, I am with you only a little longer. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

Love is the most important thing for us to do. Like Brenda and her 12 step group, there is something that is a matter of life and death for us. There is a reason we have to meet each week. We must be in this place because this is the place where we are devoted to learning and practicing God's way, which is the way of love. Without that learning and practice and demand for love in our lives, something in us will wither and perish.

Love is the most important thing for two reasons. First, we are fragile. Our bodies are fragile, our relationships are fragile, our work is fragile, and our families are often very fragile.

A short story might show what I mean about our lives being fragile. Thirty years ago I was serving breakfast at a shelter for homeless men and women. I was surprised to see a woman who looked, who acted, who dressed, and who wore the exact same kind of make-up as my mother. She was the same age as my mother, fifty or fifty five years old.

My mother was one of the most competent, stable people you could ever know. It never occurred to me that my mother could end up as a resident of a homeless shelter. In that moment, as I served breakfast, I realized that each one of us is just two or three steps away from losing the flimsy structures we have created that give us the impression of stability and security. We might feel strong and secure. We are not.

The second reason love is the most important thing for us to practice is called 'sin'. We are constantly making mistakes. Other people are constantly making mistakes. In the church we call these by an ancient name, 'sin', which means literally, to miss the target. Sin often brings tragedy into our lives. Sometimes the mistakes are our mistakes. Sometimes we face tragedy because of other people's mistakes.

Love is the only response that is powerful enough to address the effects of the fragility and tragedies of our lives. Love is the only force strong enough to heal the injuries we sustain.

In order to illustrate this, please allow me to tell you another story. It is the story of Michael Mach, a member of our vestry, and one of the members of our Sudanese Congregation. Michael has graciously given me permission to share his story with you.

About twenty-seven years ago Michael's parents and other family members were killed during the war in Sudan, which is now known as the second civil war in Sudan. This part of the civil war lasted 22 years and led to the deaths of about

2 million people. Michael was one of the youngest children to escape, to walk hundreds of miles south through wild lands, to cross the border from Sudan into Kenya to live in the Kakuma refugee camp.

In the refugee camp a group of teenage boys watched over Michael and cared for him like a younger brother. Even though life in the refugee camp was difficult and dangerous, the care of the older boys helped Michael heal from the tragedies he had experienced. After many years in the camp Michael came to Syracuse with this group of young men who became known as the 'lost boys'.

Michael was the only one of the lost boys young enough to attend high school when they arrived in Syracuse. Michael graduated from Nottingham High School and was given a full scholarship for his tuition to attend Syracuse University. Now Michael is working on his MBA at Le Moyne College. He is now working full time for the Mellon Bank of New York.

Michael is a hard worker and he is very intelligent. Michael is the strongest person I know. He is a wrestler and participated in the international wrestling championship matches in Australia three years ago. You might think Michael is not a vulnerable person. But each one of us is vulnerable in some way.

Three months ago Michael was driving his car through Syracuse. The car behind him was driving very aggressively, so he pulled over to the side of the road to let the car pass. Then something happened Michael did not expect. The other car stopped in front of his car. Two young men, their faces covered with masks, got out of the car. One of the men pointed a gun at Michael and motioned for him to get out of his car.

What would you do? Michael got out, but he refused to give up his car. He had worked hard for many years to purchase it. He punched the man with the gun, who fell back on the pavement. Then the other man punched Michael in the face. He knocked one of Michael's teeth out. Then the men ran back to their car and drove away.

Michael contacted his Sudanese brothers, and they helped him, yet this was one more large challenge added to his life. Michael had been trying to buy a house for several months. This was proving to be almost impossible. The bank refused to approve a loan for one house. Other houses were quickly purchased by other buyers. Michael's face was bruised and swollen. He was not even sure whether he should stay in America. Michael was very discouraged.

A few weeks after he was assaulted Michael attended our vestry meeting. We could not tell immediately that there was a problem. Michael said very little throughout the meeting. At the end of the meeting Michael told us about the attack and the injuries he had suffered. His voice was soft and his speech was impaired by the injury he sustained. It was difficult to understand all of his words. It was difficult to comprehend that this could happen to such a person, who we consider to be one of our strongest, most capable members.

The room was completely quiet as Michael spoke. Our vestry members were filled with grief and concern for Michael. Though I tried to respond with some words of reassurance I felt that any words I could say would be inadequate.

There is only power which is great enough to heal this sort of injury. It is the power of love. Love is more than words. Our vestry members responded to Michael's tragedy with love that went well beyond words.

After the meeting several members expressed their concerns, and talked of ways to support Michael. In the space of a few days a group of vestry members pledged to make contributions to pay for the expensive dental work needed to heal Michael's injuries.

Michael has just begun a series of procedures to replace his missing tooth. The healing is just beginning. Part of the healing is a physical healing. But a more fundamental part of the healing is about the love Michael has received from his brothers and sisters in Christ. They are trying to care for him, trying to love him, as one would for a brother or a sister. It is love which will bring true healing for the injuries he has suffered.

Michael's story is like my story or your story. At some point each of us will experience some sort of tragedy. It might be like Michael's experience. It might not feel so dramatic, but will still create a serious injury in our lives. There is only one power great enough to heal the tragedies and injuries of our lives. It is the power of love.

St. Paul's is filled with people who are trying to learn and follow God's way, which is the way of love. Sometimes we forget. We must learn a lesson from Brenda and everyone who leads the work of recovery from addiction. It is a lesson about being focused on our mission. It is a lesson about the urgency, the necessity of our work and presence and practice of love. We are reliant on God's way of love for our prospering, for our growing, for our very survival.