

Graffiti and the Voice of God **January 9, 2022**

I enjoy going for runs. In particular, I like to run on trails – at parks, along the river trail here.

There was a park that I used to run in in Rochester, in the city. One day, on a run at this park, I noticed that there was a fallen tree trunk jutting out near the path. The tree trunk was propped up a bit so that it was very visible; you couldn't miss it.

Someone had taken a can of spray paint and written a four-letter word right on that tree trunk at the edge of the path.

Now graffiti is what it is, and I didn't think much of it at first. But as I kept running, I found that I was feeling frustrated and even a bit angry. I was not angry that someone had vandalized a tree trunk in this beautiful park; I was angry because that the vandal had missed out on a wonderful opportunity.

On any given day, there must be hundreds of people who walk, run, or bike past that tree trunk. There would be thousands of people who'd see that trunk each month. That is fantastic exposure. And the only message you could think to write was a curse word?

So I came back with a can of spray paint and wrote over that word, "God loves you." I made things right. That's been my one and only foray into... evandalism. (Evangelism...vandalism... get it?)

No, I'm kidding. I didn't spray paint that tree trunk. But the rest of the story is true. I still think it was a waste of an opportunity to share a profound message with a large audience. If you're going to break the law, you might as well use the canvas to speak a word of truth or love, rather than just being crude or juvenile or destructive.

We see in our lessons today that God does the exact opposite of what that graffiti artist did. In our psalm, we hear about the power of God's voice. God's voice is so powerful, it breaks cedar trees. The voice of God shakes the wilderness. God's voice makes oak trees writhe and strips forest bare. The image is almost like an atomic bomb. Just the voice of God can lay to waste a whole forest.

But what does God actually use his powerful, mighty, limitless voice for? To speak a word of love. To say, "I love you."

"Do not fear; I have called you by name; you are mine."

"You are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you." (from Isaiah)

And from Luke: "Jesus, you are my Son, and I love you. With you I am well pleased."

That spray-painter in the park squandered his ability to spread love, and instead spread destruction, crudeness. God squandered his ability to spread destruction and instead spread love.

And those words of love are ones that we need to hear, today and every day. Because there are a lot of voices that speak to us. Some of those voices come from the news. Some of them come from acquaintances on social media. Some of the voices come from family members and friends. Some of them come from ourselves; how we talk to ourselves.

I don't know about the voices you hear, but most of the voices that I hear do not say (or even imply) "You are loved." Unless I'm talking to my family or close friends, that is not a message that I come across.

Most of the voices that I hear these days (and you probably hear them too), say things like...

"Be afraid. Of COVID, of Democrats/Republicans, of the future."

Or they say, "Look at those other people. Aren't they terrible? Aren't they ruining our way of life?"

Or oftentimes I hear a voice (more from myself than anyone): "You are not doing enough. You need to get this task done. You are letting people down."

Or maybe those voices say other messages to you.

So allow me, as your priest, to add my voice to the chatter. Allow me, just for a moment, to drown out the chatter of voices with a word from God.

You are loved. You are enough, just as you are. God created you, and God is proud of you... not because of what you have accomplished, but because of simply who you are. You are not your accomplishments. You are not what you do. You are, very simply, a child of God. You are loved. That is what God said to Jesus at his baptism; that is what God says to you and to me.

You will not hear the news anchor tell you that. You will not read that message in the newspaper. You may or may not read that on social media. And that is a sad, sad characteristic of our world. The scarcity of the message that you are loved.

But I will tell you something. I became a priest, at least in part, because I thought it was important that the church said that just a little more often than it did. And I remember the priests, the youth leaders, the wonderful people at the church where I grew up, who did communicate that, the fact that you are loved. They are all people for whom I had a deep and lasting respect.

That is, by my lights, at the core of what the Church should be. A place, a community, where you come in and can rest in the truth, that you are worthy to be loved. That is the truth given to us at our baptism. That is the truth we remind ourselves of as we gather around the Table, that everyone deserves to belong.

A couple weeks ago, Archbishop Desmond Tutu died. You'd be hard pressed to find someone who didn't respect and love Desmond Tutu. Because Tutu embodied, lived out this truth that everyone deserves love. And he did it in the midst of deep personal pain and deep division in the society of South Africa.

It was a profound statement in a time when society was organized around ethnicity, skin color – some were worthy of love, and others weren't. And what Desmond Tutu spoke – and more than

spoke, lived out – was the fact that everyone deserved love... even the people who had committed evil acts. And there was a lot of work that needed to be done – truth telling, asking for forgiveness, finding the strength to forgive over time, and eventually building peace.

The foundation for all of that was the truth that everyone deserves love.

You are loved. The United State today is not Apartheid-era South Africa. But like South Africa, we as a country also need to internalize this truth. You are loved. And so are people who fundamentally disagree with you. That stinks, doesn't it? It'd be nice if we could just say, "Those people over there are ruining our democracy. They are pure evil." That'd be nice. That'd be easy. Unfortunately for our egos, Jesus never said, "Yeah, forget those other guys! They're the enemies!"

Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." You Jews, you have to love those Gentiles. And those tax collectors who are stealing from you. And those Roman soldiers who are oppressing you. You can't indignantly hate them and look down on them and pretend that you have the moral high ground. Love them.

Terrible, isn't it?

But that is our call and our responsibility. Because like God, like that graffiti artist in the woods, you and I have a voice. You and I have the choice to spread anxiety, division, one-sided stories... or to spread truth, love, relationships, peace, cooperation.

And yes, I know those words sound like nice and lovey-dovey. They are anything but pleasant. It's a lot harder to love someone you fundamentally disagree with than to write them off as hopeless. In short, it's a lot harder to love than to despise someone. Guess which one we're called to do.

So if you remember one thing from this sermon today, it is this: you deserve love. And if you can remember a second thing from today, it is this: your worst enemy deserves love too.

I'll close with a West African prayer from a collection of prayers compiled by Desmond Tutu.

Our Churches Are Like Big Families

Lord, we thank you that our churches are like big families.

Lord, let your spirit of reconciliation blow over all the earth.

Let Christians live your love.

Lord, we praise you in Europe's cathedrals, in America's offerings,

And in our African songs of praise.

Lord, we thank you that we have brothers and sisters in all the world.

Be with them that make peace.

Amen.

"Our Churches Are Like Big Families." In *African Prayer Book*, ed. Desmond Tutu (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 65-66.