

Loving in a Dangerous Time

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

January 16, 2022

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

One of the days this past week, my wonderful family started the morning as we always do, turning on the news. At some point a video was shown; it went viral on Twitter, showing a Ukrainian Army Band, playing in Odessa. Ukrainian people waiting anxiously for a Russian attack, and here is a brass quintet playing – did anyone see this – they were playing Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy".

There, in the middle of a war, I'm sure the chaos of people fleeing their homes with doubt that they will return, some angry, some terrified. There, in the midst of all the intense emotion, is a band. In war there are never winners, only survivors. But, music and prayer are holy "gifts" found amidst this wilderness.¹

Storyteller Ralph Milton speaks about watching a mother duck, a hen, brooding over her chicks. He enjoyed watching the duck activity; the watchful hen gathering the ducklings under her wing, protecting, warming. Every so often he recalls ducklings wandering away. And, you know, his instinct, like that of many of us, is to care, to love, that duckling. He knows, though, that he needs to restrain his own needs, and scare that duckling back to its mother.²

Loving can be dangerous – profoundly dangerous. Sometimes love summons from us the courage to be vulnerable, to be exposed and authentic, caring for another enough to be hurt or even killed – this is the courageous love Jesus speaks of. Of course, we are not Jesus. We never will be. But we are made in the image of God, *imago dei*;³ Remember the story in Genesis of the Creator at work; Creating day and night, land and sea and sky, and animals of sea and land. Then the *Yahweh* (one of a few Hebrew words in the Hebrew Scriptures referring to the Creator) creates humans, the Latin Bible says, in the "imago dei" – in the Image of God. We are created *out of* love, and, we are created *to* love.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus inherits the prophetic spirit of Isaiah. Remember Jesus quoting from Isaiah in his hometown synagogue, and declaring that the prophecy has come to fruition in him? That was a little too audacious to his elders, making such a claim about himself. The community's reaction was swift and angry.⁴

Fast forward in Luke, and Jesus is rather critical of Jerusalem. I imagine him sighing as he looks at the road ahead.

The Pharisees have pleaded with him, "Herod wants you dead!" Is this genuine concern, or manipulation to send him anywhere but near them? Jesus, after all, seems to have a target on his back. I'm going to presume the better interpretation, that the

¹ Twitter <https://twitter.com/i/status/1501369297733443588>

² Ralph Milton's blog, "Rumors". February 21, 2010, found at <http://ralphmiltonsrumors.blogspot.com/2010/01/preaching-materials-for-february-28th.html>

³ Imago Dei is found within the Genesis Creation story found at <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis+1&version=NRSV> particularly note Genesis 1, verse 27

⁴ We talked about this incident a few weeks ago, you can find the story at <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=luke+4%3A+16-37&version=NRSV>

Pharisees genuinely worried about Jesus. Jesus, though, is scathing in his response (I paraphrase): *You go tell that fox, Herod that I'm going to continue my work; Healing, casting out demons.* Jesus has a laser-focused sense of the call God has given him.

God has a vision for Jesus, and not an easy one. I think we can be sure that Jesus was not thrilled at the prospect of what would happen to him in Jerusalem – he is human after all. These were dangerous times, and people are fearful of Rome. People and authorities are also particularly fearful of prophets who speak truth to corruption and power. There is fear in the air.

Think about our present time, with problems of power and corruption, people speaking truth and challenging those in power at great risk to themselves. Fear evokes extreme reactions – hiding, lashing out, scapegoating, and thereby deflecting our personal sense of responsibility. Sometimes, everyday people, normally kind and caring people, participate in systems of violence and hatred. Consciously or unconsciously, we react, we are human.

Jesus, faced with the threat of arrest and death, has this dangerous instinct, human as he is, to demonstrate compassion towards the very people who he knows are inclined to harm him. He imagines Jerusalem, the metaphor of lost chicks, and he feels the care in himself to protect and comfort them. Rather than self-preservation, his instinct is to love.

People afraid of tyrants often seek protection from warriors. Fight or flight – our lizard brain seeks executive power over us. Yet this perplexing teacher, healer and miracle worker, Jesus, will time and again mystify his closest friends. In times of war and conquest, this Messiah figure conquers not with a sword and white charger, but with a donkey and a message of unconditional love and forgiveness.

Ok, so we are not Jesus. We are not created to be saints. So how do we find that depth of compassion and love in dangerous times like these – and are these times not fraught with anger, vengeful sentiment, fear and anxiety.

Loving those who are dangerous to love. Who is that person or group of people who bring out fear in you? People who trigger your lizard fight or flight instincts? We hear about the legendary, mythical stories of heroic love, but heroic love needs to happen in your life and mine, too.

Loving people who seem completely opposite in values to you, people who might criticize you and I, goad us, trigger extreme emotions in us. I can feel emotion in me as I speak about this! In the wilderness of war, of power struggles, of prejudice. We live with an ecosystem of fear and violence, but we know that we do not have to be a part of it. I wonder if I am somewhat jaundiced in the way I perceive those Pharisees. I *could* assume that they were genuinely concerned about Jesus, but I'm probably inclined to be cynical – Lenten spiritual work ahead of me, to be more generous in my outlook. Perhaps similarly, prejudice hinders my ability to see the face of Jesus in people in my life who are very different from me.

This week I'm going to try an experiment, and I invite you to try it too. I am going to carry with me on my journey the phrase:

I am created in the image of God;

I am created by God's love, I am created **to** love.

When I see people who trigger my *lizard* brain⁵, I'm inclined to judge them, I'm going to remind myself that they too were created in the image of God. Every one of them. The self-centred, or bombastic, or aggressive people I meet.

I am created in God's love. I am created to love.

I don't have to like the person, but I am created to love them, but there is no magic formula to live out this kind of unconditional love. It is risky, and we are inevitably going to fall short of the vision God created in us. But you and I are so loved, and we are created to courageously love.

⁵ For more information about the "lizard" or "reptilian" brain, here is a basic explanation:
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/where-addiction-meets-your-brain/201404/your-lizard-brain#:~:text=Many%20people%20call%20it%20the,humans%20credit%20it%20to%20be.>