

Kirk of St James
Sunday September 23, 2018
Sermon "The Love of God and Community"
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Lillian Daniels is a minister in the states who co-authored a book called *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*. In it she recounts a story from her early days in ministry. She was standing at the bedside of one of the saints from her church in the intensive care ward. The congregant had struggled with cerebral palsy since her childhood and after a long rich life she was slipping away. Lillian describes it as follows "her words are slurred these days, but her mind is sharp. Together, in the midst of beeping machines and anxious faces, we try to get the doctor's attention. We ask him to change the policy of limiting visits to family members. She has no living family. But there are church members who have visited over the years, and now they want to visit one last time. Finally, the doctor understands. "Okay. It's like the church is her family," he mutters, making a note on her chart. Perhaps it is the same note that God made long ago in the book of cherished life." "It's like the church is her family." What an incredibly accurate description of what being part of a church community is all about. It is one those holy human mysteries where love, sorrow, brokenness and healing all encounter the deep love of God in life changing ways. Communities where God's love, joy, peace and hope are shared not only within its walls on Sunday morning but beyond that into the communities and world around us. We do this through the love of God which empowers us to do all things.

It was this love that I have been reflecting on more than anything the past week and how it has played out through Christian communities throughout the centuries. The passage that we read in Jeremiah today is perhaps an odd choice. In fact, the chapter that comes before it that deals with restoration and the new covenant is a far more popular and applicable passage. But there is something about this ordinary exchange of land that goes far beyond a simple field.

The prophet Jeremiah was a captive of the King of Judah. The field in question has an army camped on it as they laid siege to the city. The land would be completely worthless and stripped of anything valuable. Yet Jeremiah bought it not because it was valuable or of any use to him but because of the promise of what it could be. God promises that one day that occupied field will once again be a growing vineyard. So, Jeremiah buys the field and takes the jar and seals the deed in it because he wants to keep it safe. He does so not because he does not believe that God will fulfill his promise of vineyards once again being planted there--it is because he does not know how long it will take. Jeremiah has faith that God will do what he says he will at the right time. I wonder at that moment of faith. The strength of Jeremiah who did what must have seemed crazy at the time. He does not question God, he just trusts.

From week to week we read excerpts of scripture. While we tend to follow some of the books over several weeks we still miss pieces. However, if we were able to take the Bible as a whole, we would quickly see that within its pages throughout centuries and generations this is a story of love and fidelity. Not the human side of love, but rather a creator who remained faithful to his creation. It is humbling when we consider that truth. That God loved us so much that instead of wiping the slate clean he kept giving us ways to find our way back to him. He kept showing us how much he loved us. That moment fully comes to life whenever we remember the baby in a manger, and a man on a cross, and finally an empty tomb that redefined who we are and what our hope can look like.

Today we read a passage in Acts from what we might call a sermon preached by Paul. The people were so touched by what Paul said they asked him to come and preach it again. Now I must confess I have never been asked by anyone to preach the same sermon twice and that is quite okay. What was it that Paul said that day that struck them so close to home that they would long to hear it again?

Martin Copenhaver summed it up beautifully when he said "Quite simply, Paul told the story of God's fierce love affair with the world, first through the people of Israel and then through Jesus of Nazareth. Paul spoke of God's faithfulness throughout history, about the covenant God established with Israel, and about how God rescued the people from slavery in Egypt and led them into the Promised Land. He told them that all of history had been preparations for Jesus' birth and that, when the right time came, God sent Jesus out of God's own being. Paul told the people that, though Jesus was blameless, he was crucified, but the promise of his coming was fulfilled when he was raised from the dead. And his life is the source and meaning of our own lives." It was that love story that had the people asking for Paul to preach it again. God's love changes everything for us as individuals and as a community. God never lets us go.

Time and again throughout history God has asked his people to do the impossible. The Israelites once stood at the edge of the Red Sea, with an army pressing against their back while Moses asks them to take a step in faith. The prophets preached hope every day while they waited for God to fulfill His promises. When the time came, and people were returned their lands after being held captive (by whatever invading kingdom at the time) they often found themselves standing before a ruin of their former lives but, God always helped them rebuild. When Nehemiah finally convinced King Artaxerxes to allow his people to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls they were surrounded by enemies who did not want them to succeed, and a wall that was in ruins. They rebuilt it in 52 days. In the New Testament we read story after story of the lame walking, the blind seeing, the leper being cleansed, and demons being cast out. How many times did Jesus stand before the body of someone who was dead and then do the impossible and call them back to life? Through the love of God, the impossible gives way to the possibility of something much more. The only reason people have had the faith to do that,

to face those odds was because they knew at their core they were known and loved by God. That love never wavers. Not even in the face of invading armies, occupied territory, or the question of whether a vineyard will be replanted.

I often wonder what my greatest weakness is in faith. Is it doubt like Thomas, or pride, or lack of faith? When I consider the possibilities, I believe that for me fear is my greatest obstacle. While I know the love of God, and I know the strength of my faith, there is this little voice of fear constantly asking me if I am sure God is going to see me through. Fear is a voice that I often want to escape without facing, a voice I get frustrated with and wonder what God will ever be able to do with me. But, God knows who we are. He knows you, He knows me, our strengths and weaknesses. He says trust Me, trust my promises in your life. The good news is no matter what makes each of anxious we are loved and going back to the line at the beginning "the church is your family." Through all the grief in the last year and half with the loss of Dad among other events the one thing that got me through it all was knowing there was a community like you behind me. We never do anything alone.

After church this morning we are going to eat a lot of food and share a time of fellowship and then we are going to come together as a community of faith to make some decisions. I know the people who have been working on your behalf have put in a lot of time and effort. The last time I went to national office I had three National staff tell me "Amanda, there is not another question you guys could ask, good job." I know the time, process, and questions have been complete because we care about our church and each other, and because that is just part of who we are. I know that as we discuss that God will be us as he has been through countless generations, and that there is always hope when we trust in God's promises.