

A Higher Love
Sunday, May 7, 2023, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

Hear the Gospel according to Steve Winwood,
Whitney Houston and Kygo translation

Think about it/ there must be a higher love
Down in the heart or hidden in the stars above
Without it/ life is wasted time
Look inside your heart, and I'll look inside mine

Things look so bad everywhere
In this whole world, what is fair?
We walk the line and try to see
Falling behind in what could be, oh

Bring me a higher love
+
Mmm Mmmm Mmmm

If there was ever a week we needed to tap into that higher love, it is this one.

Things do look so bad everywhere.

I gotta be real with you. I mean, I don't know what I'm saying, I always want to be real with you, but it really feels like it's getting really real this week.

I'm sure just about all of you know by now that earlier this week, we received a threat that someone was going to blow up this pulpit and also that someone was going to come here this morning and "shoot the pastor of the All Saints LGBTQ Ministry Church"

And as the amazing staff and wardens of this congregation worked heroically to respond to these threats in a way that prioritized safety and yet was uncompromising in our commitment to continue being a beacon of that higher love we trust is not only out there but is the answer that is more powerful than hate....

As we were doing that important work, I had time to reflect on what I was feeling and the lessons it could teach me.

And among many other things, what I was feeling was sadness, fear and the emotion that often springs from those two ... anger.

And as I sat with those feelings in prayer, and I just want to touch on this for a moment, I realized that for me while I had felt this way before, this was not an everyday occurrence. And yet for so many among us it is.

I thought of the black and brown and images of God among us who have this fear every time their children go out or every time they see flashing lights behind their cars.

I thought of those among us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and more who live with this fear and for whom these threats activate them precisely because they are not new or unique.

And by the way, if you are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and more – first of all, let me say as plainly as I can -- from this pulpit that someone has threatened to blow up because we speak this truth --that you are in excellent company because so is God. Ain't nobody in the universe queerer than God.

I mean Genesis 1:26, check it out, God's pronouns are they/them. God is bisexual, pansexual, transgender and queer. And we are made in God's image. And those among us who are lgbtq should not be grovelingly grateful to be allowed in spaces like this, it's those of us who, as Desmond Tutu liked to say, are "so-called straight" that should be grateful that those of you who are so clearly created in God's image put up with so much foolishness from the rest of us.

If you're lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer, you've got nothing to worry about theologically. You're on the right track, baby, you were born this way – it's the rest of us that are trying to catch up! Thanks for your patience.

It was also not lost on me that the first people I knew I should call for help were our Jewish and Muslim friends who have all too much experience dealing with these sorts of threats ... and also who were so quick to come to our side. Talk about higher love.

Higher love, the love we see in Jesus, the love that is the heart of Judaism and Islam and so many other faiths, is the love that says I will stand with you always, no matter what. It is the love of God of which the psalmist sings when she says "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me."

It is that higher love that has brought all of you to this place this morning ... whether you are here or are with us online. And I just want to pause a moment and say thank you. You are the love that is more powerful than hate. You are the love that is the greatest power for healing in the universe.

Our God is an on-time God, and God has sent you here this week and this morning.

We cried out "bring me a higher love" and you showed up.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Can we just show our appreciation for all those who showed up in solidarity with us this morning?

And ... The power of love doesn't make all those other things magically go away.

I am still hurt, and scared, and angry. And if you are any or all of those things, too, please know that all that makes you is absolutely human.

And I want to talk a little about anger and its ancestors – pain and fear – this morning.

Anger when we are grieving and afraid and wounded is at least three things.

The first is, it is necessary.

Our wounds are real.

Feelings demand to be felt.

Anger gets to be expressed.

Anger isn't just OK ... it is important. It is necessary for healing.

Second, anger is scary.

Anger can frighten others and our own anger can even frighten ourselves. And because anger is a secondary emotion, fueled by fear and sadness, anger can escalate easily and quickly. We feel fear so we are angry, and then the anger makes us and others afraid, so here comes more anger ... and more ... and more ... and more.

The escalating power of anger is what Dr. King was talking about when he said, "returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars."

Anger can be scary ... and fear is a powerful force. Which leads us to the third thing about anger and that is ...

Anger is seductive.

We don't like to feel powerless. And particularly if our anger is coming out of an experience or even a lifetime of feeling helpless, expressing our anger helps us feel powerful. Because expressing anger is a powerful thing. And in those moments when we are expressing our anger it can feel good to feel so powerful. And that's where the seduction comes in – both for those who are angry and for those would use and even stoke the anger of others.

Because when we feel the power of anger, it not only can remove the pain of powerlessness, sometimes it is the only power we have felt in a long, long time ... maybe ever. And the

seduction is it can feel good to stay there. To claim that power and live in that space and never take the next step toward healing.

But while there is power in anger, there is not freedom in anger. Anger may be a necessary step to healing but if we stay there, it will be a prison like any other. That's why people who want to control people so often stoke fear to ignite anger against others for their own profit.

We see this everywhere. Frankly, all we ever have to do is look for the most irrational stuff out there and usually we can see this happening. Irrational things that create huge profits for people in power. Those among us with power use fear to make other people angry and use that anger to achieve their own ends.

It's why we have such irrational and lucrative things as militarized police forces and the death penalty. Because people with power and money can use the seductive power of fear and anger to mobilize people to create even more power and wealth for themselves.

Ironically, one of the most proficient entities at this tactic has been the church – and those who would pervert the Gospel of love to achieve their own political and economic goals.

We saw this in the late 1970s when conservative evangelicals realized they needed to elect leaders who would protect tax exemptions for whites-only schools. But they knew that openly championing segregation was on its way out as a motivational tool so instead they created another demon to battle that would motivate people to give money and elect leaders who would protect their segregationist agenda – the right of a woman, nonbinary or transgender person to control their own body.

Overnight, abortion – which three times in the 1970s the Southern Baptist Convention had affirmed under certain circumstances – became absolute murder. Doctors and people who just wanted the ability to choose whether or not to have a child became baby killers ... and millions of people became fearful and enraged ... and the money flowed for decades until the Hobbes decision finally overturned Roe.

But now those who used abortion to mobilize fear and anger, money and power, need something else, so they have turned their sights on an old favorite bogeyman – the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer images of God among us.

And so, we get threats like All Saints Church received this week. Threats to blow up the church and shoot the ministers. And it really doesn't matter where they come from ... and believe me the suggestions have been numerous from isolated people radicalized by Fox News and the religious right to people among us who merely want to feel the power of having a big church jump and react by them just making a few phone calls ... to even Russian bots and operators messing with the US and trying to stir up dissension in this country.

It really doesn't matter because the dynamic is the same. Use fear to stoke anger to help people feel more powerful and to create power and wealth for those who already have more than their share.

So, what do we do?

Well, believe it or not, the best answer I know is in this morning's Gospel reading. Imagine that!

John writes: "When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she met him, however Mary remained at the house. Martha said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, if you had been here, my brother would never have died.'"

Just reading these words like that doesn't convey the anger and pain that Martha felt.

"If you had been here, my brother would never have died" is not a sentence you say dispassionately.

Martha is in agony, and she is railing on Jesus in pain and anger, disappointment and disgust: "If you had been here, my brother would NEVER have died."

She is calling Jesus out, and she is demanding he do something. She is a protester in the street
What do we want – JUSTICE!
When do we want it – NOW!

And when Jesus instead of saying "OK now" responds "don't worry ... someday" ... Martha screams back all the more. She spits these words at him "I KNOW that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day" ... Don't give me your resurrection platitudes, savior boy. Don't give me your soothing words. My brother is dead. His body has been lying in the street ... on your watch!

We have to read it like that because then the Gospel becomes ours.

Because we are Martha.

And so, if you are feeling pain and anger right now. If you are feeling disappointment and disgust right now. If you are feeling afraid right now. Please notice that Jesus does not rebuke Martha or call her faithless or deny her feelings in any way. Jesus stands there with her in her feelings ... even when she takes his first response and throws it back in his face.

Martha gets to rage. It is important for her to rage. It is important for her own healing and thriving that she reclaim some sense of power and a validation of her pain and grief.

And that is true for us, too. Too often we are told that following the Gospel imperative of turning the other cheek is about remaining docile and compliant. It is absolutely not. Pain and

anger must be felt and expressed. And if you have trouble believing that, just come back next week and hear Jesus cry out pissed off from the cross "My god, my god, why have you forsaken me?"

So that's job one this morning. Affirming that how you are feeling right now is completely appropriate.

Now because we have already established that anger can be scary, I'm not going to invite us all into a giant communal primal scream because I know as much as that might feel good to some of us there are others here that it would just add to the fear, and I don't want to do that.

But I encourage you to find a way to express that anger somehow. To feel it in your body and to let it out. That is a good and healing and holy thing to do. To identify where we have been wounded and let the pain and grief and anger of that wound out.

And here is where I want to say a word to the person or people who made the death threats against us this morning. And if you are indeed sitting here among us or watching from afar, I hope you can hear me when I say your anger, your pain, your grief is not a bad thing. We don't feel those things unless we have a wound ... and I can only imagine you have a really deep wound to cause you to lash out at us this way.

I would actually love to know what your wound is ... or if you don't know to help you find it. And I promise you, you are not alone. I've got wounds. Everyone in this building and watching online has wounds. And those wounds cause anger and pain and grief. Look inside your heart, and I'll look inside mine ...and we can find them together.

And please hear me when I say that taking that anger and turning it into hate, that isn't going to give you what you need. That isn't the road to healing. It's not the way for you and it's not the way for us.

So, what is the way?

It's what Jesus says next.

Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even though they die, they will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Now if you listened to Chase last Sunday you will know what that word resurrection means. It means not old life prolonged or resuscitated. It is something new. It is the God who sang in Isaiah:

"Behold I am doing a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert!"

What Jesus offers is the higher love for which Martha and all of us long. Now, her heart longs for her brother's old life to have just a few more years added to it and Jesus doesn't do that, but he does two things as the embodiment of that higher love.

The first is that he stays with Martha in her pain. He holds her. He loves her. He is the safe place for her rage and sits with her until she is ready to heal.

And then he offers something better. Because that's what love does. Love always offers us something better.

James Baldwin wrote "love takes off the masks we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within."

That's resurrection love. That's the Higher Love that is God's new thing.

And it's not about if you believe in Jesus you're going to heaven and if you don't you're going to hell. That's not love and that's certainly nothing new. That's just the same old story of people trying to use fear to control.

What Jesus is talking about is the love that those of you who embrace other faiths or no faith at all and yet came to stand here with us this morning – you are showing us that higher love that Jesus offers Martha and us in this moment.

Love takes off the masks we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. That's why you among us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer are the sherpas of the faith. Because you have shown us and continue to show us what it is to take off those masks and live that higher resurrection love.

And if you who made these threats against us are in this room or you are watching online, I want you to know that love is for you as well. And you can hate us but we will not hate you. As Alexya Salvador, the first transgender pastor in Brazil said, "It is against this God who kills that we are fighting and resisting."

And what we have learned and are still learning from those among us who are most marginalized, targeted and oppressed is that the best resistance is joy. And that's what we are about this day and every day.

We are the Whos down in Whoville on Christmas Morning. Because you can threaten us and do all sorts of things to us but you will never steal our joy. And if there are grinches among us, know that there is a place for you at this table when you are ready to love ... because this is Jesus table, and Jesus never turns anyone away.

Joy is resistance.

Joy is the Higher Love.

Joy is resurrection power.

Joy is the freedom of saying I will meet your hate with love.

I will meet your wound with healing.

And the way we all get healed together is kicking off our shoes and throwing our hands up in the air and celebrating the greatest gift God gives us which is ourselves made just as we are and as we are becoming and each other to share this life with until death do we part and even beyond.

All Saints Church, it has been a week.

Things look so bad everywhere
In this whole world, what is fair?
We walk the line and try to see
Falling behind in what could be, oh
And ... we are not alone. And we are stronger than ever.
And love will turn our mourning into dancing.
Because God is doing a new thing.
All Saints Church, are you ready for a higher love?
I said All Saints Church, are you ready for a higher love?
Now you know, it's not enough to say it.
It's not enough to even to shout it
It's not enough to even sing it.

The fear, the anger, the pain, and the love ... they all live in our bodies so we have to say it, shout it, sing it with our bodies.

Because church was never supposed to be a polite dinner party where you have to be careful to use the proper fork.

Jesus came to start a circuit party 2,000 years ago and the Christ has been spinning and begging us to dance ever since. And all we need is the DJ to turn up the volume. Manny?

Bring me higher love, love
Bring me higher love
Think about it, there must be a higher love
Down in the heart or hidden in the stars above
Without it, life is wasted time
Look inside your heart, and I'll look inside mine
Things look so bad everywhere
In this whole world, what is fair?
We walk the line and try to see

Falling behind in what could be, oh
Bring me a higher love
Bring me a higher love, oh
Bring me a higher love
Where's that higher love I keep thinking of?
Bring me higher love, love
Bring me higher love (oh)
Bring me higher love, love
Bring me a higher love
Bring me higher love, love
Bring me higher love (oh)
Bring me higher love, love
Bring me a higher love
Worlds are turning, and we're just hanging on
Facing our fear, and standing out there alone
A yearning, yeah, and it's real to me
There must be someone who's feeling for me
Things look so bad everywhere
In this whole world, what is fair
We walk the line and try to see
Falling behind in what could be, oh
Bring higher love (My love)
Bring higher love, oh (Oh)
Bring higher love (My love)
Where's that higher love I keep thinking of?
Bring me higher love, love
Bring me higher love (Oh)
Bring me higher love, love
Bring me a higher love
Bring me a higher love (Oh, bring me love)
Bring me higher love, oh (We need a higher love)
Bring me a higher love (Bring me, bring me, yeah)
A higher love I keep thinking of, oh
Bring me higher love, love
(Bring me a higher love)
Bring higher love (Oh)
(Bring me a higher love)
Bring me higher love, love
A higher love I keep thinking of, oh
Bring me a higher love
(Bring me higher love, love)
Bring me a higher love, oh (Bring me higher love)

Amen.