

## **“A Love Story”**

(Acts 1:6-14; 1 Peter 4; John 17:1-11)

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The Gospels as a whole can be difficult to understand. And one of the best suggestions I have heard for how to make sense of them, is to think of them as a “love story”. That only makes sense, if we believe that “God is love.”

The Gospels are a love story between a man named Jesus and the community that took shape around him. Born in a town in the countryside, he was raised by pious working class parents and from a very young age, he displayed a wisdom and understanding far beyond his years.

He was probably trained as a carpenter, but what motivated him most was his relationship with God. He felt an absolute communion with God’s love for the world and he was determined to be faithful and serve that love, no matter what the consequences.

In his early twenties it became clear that his life’s purpose could not simply be confined to his trade and to the local community. And so he began to travel the countryside on foot, picking up followers here and there. And those he came across recognized right away that there was something different about him. He had an astonishing ability to see and

understand exactly what was happening around him, and when he spoke, he touched people's hearts right where they most needed to be touched. When he touched the blind, they cried out that they could see! When he called out to the lame, they walked.

I suppose that if you or I had met him during his earthly life, we would have been struck somehow by the goodness in his personality; the love in his eyes. I imagine that he might have also awakened fear in us, knowing that he could see through our defenses. We would have felt a greater hope and freedom awakened in us, by the way he accepted and embraced us, in spite of our failings. We would have felt the same love for him that he felt for us awakening in our own hearts.

Life was pretty tough in those days and news spread quickly about Jesus. And pretty soon he and his followers were being overwhelmed by needy people. There were times when he felt desperately tired and had to go off by himself to pray. But he had an amazing faith that God would provide. He trusted completely in God's power to give him everything he needed and to make a way where no way seemed possible. And he believed in God's power to do the same for us, if we too would only put our faith in God.

Jesus had a clear understanding of the cost of loving as he did. And although his followers did love him, they did not want to recognize that cost. They had trouble not also seeing him instead, as their way of gaining some kind of social or political advantage over others that they could exploit. But he fiercely refused to do so and instead lived his life as a demonstration of God's self-giving love, which was seen by many as weakness and foolishness and a wasted opportunity. And many turned against him, for it.

He died in his early twenties, crucified for being true to that love; true to the only power that can really save us. And in the aftermath of his life, the people who had grown to love him went through a time of confusion and surprising insights.

Jesus's resurrection, for his followers was all at the same time, a crushing experience, a bewildering experience and a hopeful experience. The range of their experiences was not so different from what happens in our own hearts and minds when we are separated from people we have grown to love.

And that is where we are today in the Gospel love story. We are at Ascension Sunday, which marks the moment of separation, after which his followers will never again see him in the earthly form they have

come to know and love. The Gospel reading is part of Jesus's goodbye to his followers and our first reading from Acts described that final moment of separation, when Jesus ascended into the heavens and disappeared.

It is a moment that we dread, that inevitably comes to us all in the love story that is our own lives, when someone we have given our hearts to will be taken from us into the great beyond, never to be seen again in the form we have come to know and love. And it is a moment that we never forget, once it has occurred. It's one of the most heart wrenching places in the Gospel story, especially if we understand it as a love story that is also our story.

And as Jesus's friends watch him disappearing into the mystery of the heavens, two men in white appear and say to them:

“Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

That question, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” tells us that Jesus's followers are not quite ready to let go. They are in the “Can't let go” moment that everyone who has ever loved has keenly felt. It is that moment when the one in whom you have invested so

much of your life and happiness is separated from you and disappears into the mystery and you are stuck; unable to take your mind off of what has happened. And as far as you are concerned, all the rest of the world has disappeared and nothing else seems to matter or even exist. And that moment can go on for a long time.

Above Shinjuku station in Tokyo, is the intersection which is famous for being the busiest intersection in the world. And off to the side of that intersection, at the subway entrance there is a statue of a dog name "Hachiko." Hachiko is a dog who came every day to the station to meet its owner coming home from work. This is back in the 1930's. One day the owner died at work and did not get off the train. But Hachi continued to come back to meet the train for nine years after his death. And after Hachiko died, a statue was erected in memory of the dog's faithfulness and the beauty which it inspires in human hearts.

Hachi remained faithful to the past. But for us as human beings, life has to go on. We can't just stay stuck. And so, the two men in white who appear at Jesus's Ascension, call their attention away from the heavens into which Jesus has disappeared and back to the earth about them. And the second part of what they say is, I think, the most thought provoking and also the most comforting thing Jesus's followers can hear

in that moment. They tell them that, “This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will return in the same way you saw him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11)

To me, the words of these two men are really worth spending some time thinking about, especially for those of us who have lost loved ones and are like Hachi who came to the station every day. They are telling Jesus’s friends that it’s time to stop looking off into space and come back to earth and to their lives... They are not telling them to erase the memory of Jesus or pretend that his life didn’t matter to them. Instead, the two are providing the words they need to hear in order to let go and move on. They are giving Jesus’s friends something to lean on; that is, a trusting faith that this man that they love, who has disappeared, will return to be with them from out of the same mystery into which he has disappeared.

This is a striking thing to say in the face of what we assume to be the finality of death. We assume that when someone we love is taken away from us, never again to be seen in earthly form, that it is the end of it. Instead, we hear the words : “Your loved one, who has been taken from you, will return to you in the same way he/she left you.” In other words, that same person will come to us out of the mystery and reenter

our lives. The separation will somehow be reversed and become a reunion.

When my dad died in 2009, it was one of the most traumatic events in my life. I flew back from Hawaii to be at his bedside here at Baystate Springfield. And I was there with other family members, when the light left his eyes and he disappeared into that great mystery. Before returning to Hawaii, I went down to a bridge my dad used to go for walks on. It's the one that crosses the Connecticut River just below the General Pettis bridge.

It was snowing hard in huge beautiful flakes and as I leaned on the railing and watched them fall, it occurred to me that God was helping me grieve, using the beautiful snowflakes to help me work through working out in a poetic way, the loss of this great love in my life. Because, isn't it true that each of us is like a beautiful snowflake, drawn together out of the mystery above. Each of us is as unrepeatable in its design as a fingerprint; a design that you can grow to love. I loved everything from the sound of dad's flip-flops as he walked around the house, to his terrible efforts at being a classical pianists.

As the snowflakes fell toward the dark waters below, it seemed that nature was reminding me how short and precious our earthly existence

is. Because it seems as though, no sooner had I begun to truly appreciate my father than, like a snowflake touching the water, he had disappeared; dissolved back into the mystery out of which he came. And all my heart could do was cry, “Where are you?” I was heartbroken to think that this unrepeatably design that was my father had been taken from me.

And so what a strange thing it is to hear the words of the Gospel breaking into this absorption with grief and loss: “This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back to you in the same way he left you.” What can this mean?

Of course our loved ones are not Jesus. But it is also true that they are not, not-Jesus either. He lives in us and we live in him and it is this unity that we have in his Spirit that, it seems to me, is what joins all of us together at the deepest level of who we are. Everything that can be said about Jesus, in some mysterious way also applies also to us

So I went back to my job in Hawaii, carrying my grief with me. I probably spent too much time in that “can’t let go” frame of mind. It was a struggle that I think is also reflected in today’s readings in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, when he speaks of the ‘fiery ordeal,’ the ‘roar of the prowling lion’ that is our adversary. 1st Peter, is not just referring to our struggles



against the powers of evil in the world around us, but also to our inner struggle against the kind of despair over losing loved ones that can sour us and make us resentful and angry at the world or that can make us afraid of opening our hearts to others, out of the fear of being hurt again.

I did get over it, or at least the more intense part of that struggle. And now that some time has passed, I do very much feel that both of my parents have, in fact, returned and reentered my life, not as some lifeless idea, but as I knew them when they were at their best in my eyes. And I experience them now as a living presence with me giving me good advice and encouragement, as they always did.

And so you could say that, in a way the Gospel story offers us the happiest possible ending to each of our love stories, if we are willing to have faith and put it all in God's hands. The story suggests to us that, when we give ourselves over to God's love, the inevitable pain of will be temporary. We will never lose our loved ones, because they will always return to us in order to love us back.

I also think it is true that the best way to think of life is to think of it as being part of a love story. Separation is a necessary and painful part of

that story. But for those who have been truly touched by that love, separation is not just an end. It is also the beginning of an even more profound love.