



**From the Pulpit: November 5, 2023**

All Saints' Sunday

**The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

I Corinthians 13:6; Daniel 3:13–30

The Greatest of These, IX: Integrity

We turn to love and I Corinthians 13 to this work of integrity. *Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth.*<sup>1</sup> In this way, love is heroic. Love stands tall. Love swims up stream. Love does what is right even when what is right is hard. Love faces death and does not flinch. Love has integrity. Love is a verb. And in a troubled world, love has hard work to do.

*Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.*<sup>2</sup>

If I Corinthians 13 is Saint Paul's variegated painter's palette of definitions of love, then the rest of scripture becomes a chorus of artists—Vincent Van Gogh, Claude Monet, Bisa Butler, Georgia O'Keeffe—painting image after image of what love looks like.

And so, we turn to the prophet Daniel, to deepen and focus our image of love.

*Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe, and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, if the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, then God will deliver us from your hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know,*

*"remember those saints of light who—like Saint Paul—do not delight in evil, and thus risk their lives in order to rejoice in the truth."*

What a strange and beautiful text for All Saints' Sunday. It works perfectly in so far as those Saints of Light whom we love *themselves* live with integrity, taking, at times, radical and necessary risks for the sake of their own ethical benchmark. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—not their original names, of course, but names given by the Babylonian Empire—were displaced persons, deportees, prisoners of war, people of the exile brought to Babylon after the siege of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar. In an earlier part of the story, they were spared from the King's quick anger by the book's namesake, Daniel, and now they are back in the grip of Nebuchadnezzar's frothing rage, this time about to be thrown into the furnace.

They could back down. They could placate the monarch. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego know that there is no winner's circle with this megalomaniac. He eats illusions of grandeur for breakfast. He takes egotism pills with his afternoon snack. For this king, there is no time for humility. No time to delight in what is good. If they back down now, if they surrender there is still a good chance that they'll be back in the king's clutches within a fortnight.

<sup>2</sup>Daniel 3:13-18 NIV translation with an edit to verse 17 because as Carol A. Newsom notes in *Daniel: The Old Testament Library* "Early translators were apparently scandalized by v.17, for rather than rendering it as conditional ("if our God, whom we revere, is able to save us"), they make it into a positive statement ("For there is a God in heaven, our one lord whom we fear, who is able to save us"). Although some early twentieth-century commentators continued trying to find alternative translations that put a more confident statement in the mouth of the three, the linguists of the passage require the conditional translation."

<sup>1</sup>I Corinthians 13:6

There is no pleasing him. There is always one more power grab. One more threat. One more chance to belittle, deride, criticize. (Did you know that the CDC recognizes a childhood growing up with someone like Nebuchadnezzar lead to chronic health problems?) King Nebuchadnezzar is a super-villain extraordinaire, a cartoonish composite of every bad leader, demagogue, and tyrant ever to grace the history books.

In his book *Awe: the New Science of Everyday Wonder*, Dacher Keltner suggests that horror and awe are adjacent emotions.<sup>3</sup> It is possible to be astonished and in awe of the depravity of a human being like Nebuchadnezzar, or in awe at the awful conditions of our social horrors and hierarchies like the ones Shadrach Meshach and Abednego face. By facing Nebuchadnezzar, by not backing down, the three are rendering chaotic violence powerless. If they are not afraid of death, the king has nothing. He is impotent. Vulnerable. Paralyzed. We are in awe of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in part because we suspect that in the face of such raw power and violence, we might melt. Who would willingly put the furnace to the test?

But, we know the answer to that, it's in our history books too: Fannie Lou Hammer, Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King Junior, Oskar Schindler, Nelson Mandela. "I love the name of honor more than I fear death," says Shakespeare's Brutus. It's hard to read Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego without conjuring up those live historical contexts in which tyrants and oppressors have brought unspeakable suffering upon those who are different. We can't help but remember those saints of light who—like Saint Paul—do not delight in evil, and thus risk their lives in order to rejoice in the truth.

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood up to imperial power, and the Nazis sent him to prison for two years before finally executing him in a concentration camp two weeks before liberation. Decades earlier, when his brothers caught wind that Bonhoeffer wanted to become a pastor, they chide him saying, "religion is a distraction from the urgent work of promoting equality and human rights."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Dacher Keltner, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder* (New York: Penguin Press, 2023).

<sup>4</sup>Marsh, Charles. *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014, page 17.

And we get it. Howard Thurman—pastor to the Civil Rights movement—puts it this way, "Many and varied are the interpretations dealing with the teachings and life of Jesus of Nazareth. But few of these interpretations deal with what the teachings and the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand with their backs against the wall. To those who need profound succor and strength to enable them to live in the present moment with dignity and creativity. Christianity he says, has often been sterile and of little avail."<sup>5</sup>

"In other words as we hold dear those we have lost, they help us live again."

Bonhoeffer's year studying theology abroad in New York City solidified his understanding of the world from the perspective of those who have their backs up against the wall. As a student at Union Seminary, Bonhoeffer befriended Albert Franklin Fisher, an African American student who welcomed Bonhoeffer into Harlem and the Abyssinian Baptist Church, where Bonhoeffer saw for himself the racial inequalities and indignities of the United States. From 1930's Harlem, he saw how the church failed at integration, playing its own part in the architecture of racism. Because of his New York City experience, when Bonhoeffer returned to Germany, his voice was among the first to reject the Nazi regime, especially the church's complicity. He taught at a Confessing seminary, a religious institution forced to close by the Gestapo in 1937 and declared illegal.

So we get it. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego suggest that God might save them from the fiery furnace, it is less a story about faithful people challenging God, but instead about people with their backs against the wall challenging the empire, the systems of injustice because love does not delight in evil. While Nebuchadnezzar finds power in threatening and oppressing, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego direct their worship to the One who dies with those who have their backs up against the wall.

So we get it. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego suggest that God might save them from the fiery furnace, it is less a story about faithful people challenging God, but instead about people with their backs against the wall challenging the empire, the systems of injustice because love does not delight in evil. While Nebuchadnezzar finds power in threatening and oppressing, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego direct their worship to the One who dies with those who have their backs up against the wall.

<sup>5</sup>Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2022, page 4.

As Bonhoeffer puts it, this faith “stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power, and with its plea for the weak,”<sup>6</sup>... “only the suffering God can help.”<sup>7</sup> It is by trusting in the God of love who suffers-with-us that the three can face the furnace together, not knowing what will happen if they will survive or not.

Simply put they were, with their act of resistance, declaring with Saint Paul that love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. This kind of love is within each of us. It is innate. It is necessary. It is possible. Love is primary. Love is practical. Love is permanent. This is how John Proctor sums up 1 Corinthians 13. Love is primary. Love is practical. Love is permanent.<sup>8</sup>

Love is permanent, and yet we are mortal. On this All Saints’ Sunday, I feel that tension. Without love, there is no grief, says Amy Hollywood, or maybe she says, without grief, there is no love. Amy Hollywood’s great-grandmother died of what they called at the time “acute melancholia”—she died of a broken heart after her husband, brother, and more than one of her children died in quick succession. And so Amy Hollywood wonders what would have made it otherwise? She says that for her, the ones we refuse to lose enable us to live.<sup>9</sup> In other words as we hold dear those we have lost, they help us live again. Is that true for you? The ones we have lost enable us, in their own way, to live?

Weeks, months, years, decades later, the grief is somehow raw and whole again, and yet they are the ones who carry us through. Maybe grief is so meandering and serpentine because love is so deeply embedded within us.

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The Beatles released their last song on Thursday. *Now and Then*, they call it.<sup>10</sup> It was some forty years ago that John Lennon died, and yet they refused to lose him, and there he is even now, enabling them to live. His three friends from Liverpool joined him on Thursday for a final little lost love song, with George too, singing across the veil now as much as John did. Maybe you heard the story? In the years between the Beatles break up and John’s death, John kept making music. Then in 1994 many years after John’s death, when Yoko Ono and Paul were brought together for John’s induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, she brought Paul a few cassette tapes, recordings of John’s last never-released songs. This little cassette set off a chain reaction, where Paul brought Ringo and George together in 1995 to record with that old track of John’s. But the tech at the time couldn’t scrub away the background noise, and the song was shelved. Languished in the cupboard, Paul said. Fast forward another quarter century, even after losing George to lung cancer, and technology finally caught up with the Beatles vision.

Peter Jackson (of Lord of the Rings fame) invented some new audio restoration method, and there was John’s voice, crystal clear. It was as if he was there, Ringo said, John—there—singing, “I know it’s true, it’s all because of you, and if I make it through, it’s all because of you.”<sup>11</sup>

Grief is circuitous. Serpentine. We make it through because we have these loved ones to walk the way with us, just visible, they’re beyond the veil. And we stand in awe at the ways they loved, in awe of the lives they led, in awe of the risks they endured, in awe of the love they carried for us.

May we live by the love of the Saints of Light. May they carry us through.

<sup>6</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer in London, 1933-1935: A Study of His Theological Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), page 402.

<sup>7</sup>Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Touchstone. 1997, page 479.

<sup>8</sup>Proctor, John. *First and Second Corinthians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015.

<sup>9</sup>Hollywood, Amy. “Acute Melancholia.” Lecture presented at the Inaugural Lecture of the Elizabeth H. Monrad Chair in Christian Studies, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2 March 2006.

<sup>10</sup>Lennon, John and McCartney, Paul. “Now and Then.” The Beatles, 2023.

<sup>11</sup>The Beatles. *The Beatles - Now and Then - The Last Beatles Song (Short Film)*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APJAQoSQuA> November 5, 2023.

## —Prayers of the People— Sarah Champlin

It is truly right and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere, to give thanks to you, O Lord. You are the creator of the universe, and the God of all the ages. We praise you for all the martyrs and saints of every time and place, who in life and death have witnessed to your truth and love.

Whether in big cities or tiny villages, in crumbling cement meeting houses or grand cathedrals, you have gathered them into your kingdom.

God of the Good News, you have shown them the path of life and filled them with the joy of your presence. We give thanks that their faithfulness has paved the way for our lives to follow.

In our own lives, we sit at tables where there are vacant seats, people we love and miss who no longer stop by for dinner or visit for the holidays. Around the world, war, violence, illness and disaster create more empty chairs than our breaking hearts can bear.

We grieve for those empty chairs, but know that in Christ, our separation is only temporary. Therefore, we praise you, joining our voices with angels, prophets, and martyrs, and with that great multitude of the faithful of every time and place, who rejoice in your name.

Unite us at the table of our Lord with the saints of our own fellowship who have passed into your eternal care. We remember their witness:

Don Asher

Annemarie Bales

Barbara Balsley

Dr. Gilbert Bowen

Robert Brandon

Julien (Jerry) Collins

Tanya Dietrich

Bernie Dobroski

Nancy Dorrer

Bruce Gooden

Elizabeth Greene

John Hales

Howard Hayes

Paula Keatinge

John Kemper

Andrew Kerr, Jr.

Robert Kolar

Jens Milling

Genevieve Phelps

John Puth

Reginald Rabjohns

Susie Rammelt

Christie Savage

Sarah Scott

David R. Seibel

Raymond Weber

Joan Zabel

Bless the memories of your saints, God. They left their mark on the earth for you, for us, for our children to come.

Spirit, move in us, that we might know we too are counted among the saints, God's beloved children, vessels of God's grace. May we learn how to walk wisely in your ways with the guidance of those who came before.

Now we lift our prayer to you, joining our voices to those that echo throughout the generations, using the words that Jesus taught us: Our Father.... Amen.

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