

## Sermon: Singing a New Love Song

Year C, All Saints

[Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31](#)

Offered November 6, 2016 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

Psalm 149 says *For the LORD takes pleasure in the people; the LORD adorns the humble with victory.* (Psalm 149:4) On All Saints' Day, we remember those we have lost. In the end, death feels like the greatest challenge to our belief that God will adorn the humble with victory. All Saints' Day is one of the days where we acknowledge that that challenge is always with us. More than acknowledging this reality that gnaws at the back of our mind, we answer the challenge.<sup>1</sup> We are here together, praising God, singing a new song, remembering those that have gone before us, gathering as a community to declare that our lives, now and forever, are part of the life of God. Yes, we weep. Jesus assures us that blessed are those who weep now, for you will laugh (Luke 6:21). It doesn't feel like laughter is coming, because the jagged hole where our loved ones were still has such sharp edges. Even if it has been years since they have passed, the smell of leaves mulched in a lawn mower or the sight of a Cubs jersey on TV can bring the broken glass we will always carry inside us right back.

We miss them. The whole them. The good and the annoying. They were a whole song being sung to the LORD. Admittedly, sometimes that song was a bit rough, flawed. It was imperfect the way any human song is supposed to be imperfect. But it was their song. And we miss it. Because we sang a duet with that song. Or maybe a whole cantata, when you fold in our kids and friends and neighbors. Our song was different because they were alive to sing their song, to update and change and re-release their song. Our song changed because they were singing. Sometimes it feels like our song would be better, richer, more meaningful if they were still singing.

When Jesus commands us to *do to others as you would have them do to you* (Luke 6:31), well, we knew how to do that with the people we have lost. We had it sort of worked out. We knew how to take care of each other in a way that made us better, made us more. When Jesus said that the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the reviled are blessed (Luke 6:20-22), he was pointing out that they had a relationship with God that was not in jeopardy.<sup>2</sup> Our relationships with the ones we have lost, the ones we have named here today, were like that. We knew what they required. We knew how to tend them, what to pay attention to, when it was better to ignore something. When we think of how we want to be treated, we don't expect strangers to have the kind of affection towards us that the people we love have. When we look in the mirror, we want the best for the person that is staring back at us, no matter what has come before.<sup>3</sup> That is what we could do for the people we loved. Jesus is asking us to do that for everyone, to want the best for them, to work towards that goal, even if they had said and done pretty horrible things to us.

---

<sup>1</sup> D. Cameron Murchison, "All Saints, Theological Perspective, Psalm 149" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 226 & 228.

<sup>2</sup> E. Elizabeth Johnson, "All Saints, Exegetical Perspective, Luke 6:20-31" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 241.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Russell Bowie, "The Gospel According to St. Luke: Exposition," in vol. 8 of *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1952), 121.

When we look out past our homes, our country church, we're not so sure we're going to be able to follow Jesus' commandment to *do to others as you would have them do to you* (Luke 6:31). This election has been full of people saying pretty ugly things to each other. The new song that's emerging there seems pretty rough, pretty loud. It's not a song we're sure we want to sing. Especially if that means singing with people who *really* don't want to sing with us. And have said so in pretty clear terms. And yet we all know that in the end we must vote, it's part of the song of our lives. It's part of the American song that our ancestors went through so much to bring into this world. So we have to look at our vote in this election in a new light because for many of us, we can't remember an election that has ever felt this way before.

Indeed, it feels like something more like the end of Psalm 149 is more likely to be sung. *Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples* (Psalm 149:6-7). It's more apt than you might realize. Psalm 149 is a song of praise, but it's also a political song, referring back to the period before the Israelites had a king, when they governed themselves. It was written after they returned from exile in Babylon, when they were working out how to form a new relationship with each other when the previous system of kings descended from David had led to the destruction of their homeland.<sup>4</sup> As a conquered people, they never got to establish a system independent of the Babylonians, Greeks and Romans who ruled that part of the world.

The phrase that's translated "two-edged sword" is correctly translated, but it literally says, "a sword with two mouths." It's used in the Bible eight times, in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic, and in each language it has the same literal translation "a sword of mouths." In each language, this type of sword also referred to the potency of language. The sword itself is shaped more like an axe head than something from King Arthur. It gets its name, scholars think, because it tears the flesh the way our mouths tear flesh when we eat roasted meat.<sup>5</sup> So buried in the psalm we read this morning is a political message, a harkening back to the good old days when the people were in charge of their fate, not a king. Likewise, there's an acknowledgement that physical violence is intimately related with verbal violence.

The violence described in the Psalm concludes by saying *to execute on them* [the opponents] *the judgment decreed*. (Psalm 149:9) An alternative translation reads *to enact among them the justice that is written*.<sup>6</sup> For me, that puts a new light on the violence described in the Psalm, especially when it is read with Jesus demanding that I do to others as I would have them do to me.

Jesus leads to that instruction by telling us to love our enemies. So first we must acknowledge that we have enemies, that we have people who hate us, curse us, abuse us (Luke 6:27-28). If we are to love them, then we can't simply label them as "other" and decide to live our lives as if they did not exist. If we listen to them, really listen, loving them enough to get past the words that tear like a mouth eating roasted meat, we will truly hear their complaints. We will truly hear their demands for justice. If we are to love our enemy, we step into the gray areas, we hear their

---

<sup>4</sup> David R. Ruhe, "All Saints, Pastoral Perspective, Psalm 149" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 226 & 228.

<sup>5</sup> Joshua Berman, "The 'Sword of Mouths' (Jud. iii 16; Ps. cxlix 6; Prov. v 4): A Metaphor and Its Ancient Near Eastern Context." *VetusTestamentum* 52, no. 3 (2002): 292.

<sup>6</sup> Ruhe, 228.

allegations and realize that some of those allegations originate in us.<sup>7</sup> If we are to enact the justice that is written for our enemies, that means accepting our responsibility for some of their complaints, and making reparations. Our enemies may see what we do and crow that they were right all along; they may offer more cutting words and strike us on the cheek, take away our coat and even our shirt (Luke 6:29). But if we are to seek to enact the justice that is written, that is what we are called to do.

When we do that, we are singing the song of our lives in tune with the song Jesus was sent to bring into this world. Those we love who have gone before us taught us how to do to others as you would have them do to you, when we love the others. They have given us the knack to find a way around words that tear our heart because of our desire to remain in relationship. Jesus has asked us to remain in relationship with everyone, even our enemies, so that we can all work for the justice that God is seeking in this world. Being blessed means that our relationship with God is not in jeopardy. By treating our enemies as we treat those that we love, regardless of how we feel about our enemies, we are strengthening all the relationships in our lives. We are singing a new song unto the LORD. We are praising God and affirming that even death cannot separate us from those that we love and the love of God. Amen.

---

<sup>7</sup> Moffett S. Churn, "Between Text and Sermon: Luke 6:27-36." *Interpretation* 68, no. 4 (October 2014): 129.