

Matthew 22: 34 - 46**Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25A****October 29, 2023****The Rev. Katherine Bush**

Eight hundred years ago, Julian of Norwich was trying to puzzle out the meaning of her dreams and visions, and after decades of visions and struggles, she wrote down these words, "I desired many times to know our Lord's meaning ... And I was answered in spiritual understanding, and it was said: 'What do you wish to know our Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, Love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For Love. Remain in this [love], and you will know more of the same. But you will never know different, without end.' So I was taught that Love is our Lord's meaning. And I saw very certainly in this and in everything that before God made us, he loved us, which Love was never abated and never shall be."

Whether through the science of relativity or the mystical power of good liturgy, we can sometimes collapse time, or at least imagine the layers of history overlapping. And in this way, I can imagine Julian, an anchoress from the outer bounds of fourteenth-century England, leaning over to the earnest (because let's give him the benefit of the doubt and take him that way) religious legal scholar talking to Jesus, her sidling up next to him and saying, *I wondered the same thing. I wondered what it was all about, what is the most important thing, how should we live in these harrowing times?* His times were harrowing, the omnipresent and oppressive empire breathing down their necks; her times were harrowing, plague and turf warfare, such different people and yet sympathetic to each other. And maybe we can imagine ourselves in our own harrowing days crowding into this scene as well.

The Jewish scholar and the medieval Christian hermit are trying to figure it all out. What is God up to given all this violence? How should we shape our lives given all this sorrow? And scrolling past stories from the so-called Holy Land and from Lewiston, Maine, and from anywhere and everywhere, maybe you and I want to lean in and whisper a word of gratitude to him for asking the question we are wondering too. "Teacher, which commandment is the greatest?" I'd like to focus my efforts against the tide of apathy. There's a lot of uncertainty and confusion swirling around about what is called for in these times. Some are saying it's time to meet violence with violence, to seek vengeance in a never-ending spiral. And Julian, remember she's there too, chimes in to say, I keep seeing these visions, which are strange and startling, and also all around me I see pitiful death and disease, so please tell me "what does it mean?"

And we're leaning close enough maybe to hear Jesus sigh quietly before answering, but not in frustration, rather in appreciation for the depth of longing behind the question: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first command. And a second is like it; 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." And perhaps, because we're being soft-hearted toward the diligent scholar, we imagine that he says, *right, yes, I knew that*. And Julian nods and whispers almost to herself, *yes, yes, Love was his meaning*. And you and I, look at each other, a little chagrined that we needed the reminder, and mouth silently, *love, yes, that's always been the answer*.

Love is the simple and even obvious answer, but we also know it's not the easy answer. That's why we keep looking around at the burning world and wondering, what are we really supposed to do about all this? Because we'd all acknowledge that love is a good answer, maybe the best answer - you know, Jesus saying it and all. Still, I bet I'm not the only one who looks around some days and thinks love might not be realistic, nor an adequate answer. Doesn't it seem at least a little naive and treachery? Like the Pharisee who knew the law and the stories of his people inside and out, and still was curious if maybe Jesus - who is staring down a wave of violence, you'll recall, that will crush his strength and for moments his own heart and soul - might waiver and offer another path. We too can look up from the headlines of faraway places and from the hurt and brokenness of our own lives, and say, are you sure that love is enough?

Into this scene of collapsed time and space, bringing a scholar and a guru from across the globe and the centuries, we can keep adding poets and theologians and prophets. Everyone wriggling and shimmying into the scene, covered and uncovered heads, murmuring in different tongues, referencing their own pages. Again and again, each in their own verse and language, these spiritual masters understand the impulse to repeat the question. In times of war, in days where random violence wends its way into our lives, when we are sick, when those in power seem high on power, when bitterness and cruelty seem pervasive, because, friends, the times are not new, how are we called to live, what is the divine priority for our lives? And also, again and again, all these dear voices sing out to each other, nodding with familiarity and sheepish smiles, remember it's love, love is the way, the answer, the meaning of our little lives. Again and again, because, friends, we always need reminding.

Sharon Salzberg, a Buddhist contemplative teacher who might have found her way into the crowd that is gathering in our imagination, wrote that "only love is big enough to hold all the pain of this world." She talks about love making us brave, calling it the "antidote to fear." She is another one who sees the world and its cratering tendency and joins the cycle of conversation that asks and answers on repeat: what must we do; oh right, we must love. The huddle of people who are folded into this scene might confound us. Even those people whom we villainize want to know how to live, and across all kinds of supposed boundaries of time and politics, the answer is consistently love. And we scoot into the gathering finding our places where we can hear the conversation, wondering what God means for us to do in times like these, and we learn again, and will likely need to learn again tomorrow, that God means for us to love and to let that love hold us to this world and to each other. Can you put yourself in this scene? Can you let the work of ancient prayers or your own imagination tether you to this community of those who wonder and remember? Who else would you look up and see in the circle that is growing? Mentors, friends, people who make you mad, people you learned from whether you met them or not, plus the Pharisee, and Julian, and maybe Sharon, and likely loads more folks. Can you see them all jostling up closer? We're all here, all of us. Because the question is universal, what ought we to do, Lord? And the answer is always love.

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