



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

"Somebody Loves Us All"
The Third Sunday in Easter
May 1, 2022
The Rev. Scott Walters

Elizabeth Bishop has a poem about an artifact from an ancient, long-lost civilization. It's titled "Filling Station." For all of you people younger than I am, a filling station is what they used to call gas stations back when someone in a uniform would scurry out to fill your tank and check the engine oil while you waited in the comfort of your unairconditioned vehicle. A lost civilization indeed, right?

The filling station in the poem is a dirty one. There's the father in an "oil-soaked monkey suit/ that cuts him under the arms,/ and several quick and saucy and greasy sons..." The poet wonders whether the family lives in the station, seeing a grimy dog on a grease-impregnated wicker sofa and some comic books lying "upon a big dim doily/ draping a taboret/ ... beside a big hirsute begonia." Here's how it ends:

Why the extraneous plant?
Why the taboret?
Why, oh why, the doily?
(Embroidered in daisy stitch
with marguerites, I think,
and heavy with gray crochet.)

Somebody embroidered the doily.
Somebody waters the plant,
or oils it, maybe. Somebody
arranges the rows of cans
so that they softly say:

esso—so—so—so

to high-strung automobiles.

Somebody loves us all.

Somebody loves us all. That's what the embroidered doily, the watered plant, the quarts of oil arranged just so seem to say. Evidence that we are loved can show up in the simplest attention paid to the most ordinary kinds of things, can't it?

That might sound like a strange insight to begin with as we spend a few minutes with a passage from the gospel of John. Of the four gospels John seems least interested in the ordinary, wouldn't you agree?

John doesn't begin with a baptism in the wilderness or the announcement to an old couple about a birth. John has our heads swirling back at the beginning of time. "In the beginning was the Word," he tells us, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

John isn't the gospel of the Sermon on the Mount. It's the one in which Jesus says things like, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

It's not the gospel where Jesus sweats and frets in the garden before his death, and asks that this cup pass from him. In John when the soldiers come to that garden with torches and weapons and say they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, he says "I am he," and they collapse into a heap at the sound of his great I AM.

The fabulous nature of John can make it less immediately appealing to a lot of us modern folk. It's fabulous and strange, but the strangest thing about John may be that after the resurrection is when things seem to get weirdly ordinary.

Mary Magdalene is the first to see the risen Christ on Sunday morning, but she mistakes him ... remember this? She mistakes him for a gardener. It's as if the resurrected Jesus is too ordinary to notice. Nothing like the guy who could make a detachment of soldiers fall over with a word.

Don't get me wrong. Things are still weird. The risen Christ can appear in locked rooms. But when he does, he helps Thomas along in his belief by showing him the wounds in his hands and side. He says, "It's OK, Thomas. You can touch me if that's what you need to believe."

And then in today's reading, the disciples have just had a lousy night fishing on the Sea of Tiberius. Jesus is standing on the beach at daybreak, telling them to throw the nets over the other

side of the boat. And when they do, they can barely contain the fish. Oh, and it's not just a whole lot of fish. It's 153 fish. Did you catch that? For some reason that curiously specific number ... not a factor of 7 or 12 or 40 or any of the Bible's favorite numbers. Not anything obviously symbolic. Just a detail in a world of countable things that makes the image of all those silvery bellies, flopping and flashing in the sun, all the more vivid.

This is a world we recognize even 2,000 years later, isn't it? A world we can conjure in a moment, and next thing we know there's a charcoal fire on the shore with fish on it and bread and Jesus doesn't say, "I am the bread of life." He says, "Let's have some breakfast." And the disciples ... they don't know what to say. What are they to make of this? Everything is weird because everything is so ordinary. Is this what resurrection looks like? Is this how Divine Love shows up in our lives? Fish, cooked on a charcoal fire for breakfast?

It's as if John was setting us up with that grand prologue about the Word being with God in the beginning. Luke is the gospel who ends the story with Jesus ascending into the clouds. That's how John should have ended right? Jesus returning to the place where the Word was from all eternity. But no. John ends down here. On a beach we can see, beside a fire we can smell and a pile of fish someone has counted. He ends with Jesus turning to Simon Peter, the friend who denied him three times, and asks him three times, "Do you love me?" "Do you love me?" "Simon, do you love me?" "Feed my sheep."

Sometimes evidence that we are loved shows up in the simplest of attention paid to the most ordinary of things, doesn't it? Somebody loves us all. And he wants us to pass that love along, in this world of ordinary things, even on the resurrection side of Easter. Maybe especially on the resurrection side of Easter.

Any love the Bible might contain, of course, doesn't matter much to the world until it comes into contact with the ordinary particulars of lives like ours. It won't surprise many of you that I've had the report from a feasibility study, of all things, on my mind this week. Mieke Vandersall and Erin Weber-Johnson presented their findings at our 9:15 a.m. forum. And what I've loved about this process is the way it involves some aspects of our common life that are objective and countable, such as survey response rates, project priorities, and, of course, dollars. But since Mieke and Erin and their team understand churches, they translated that more quantifiable data into the even more important

realms of hope and trust and what faithfulness to Calvary's mission to make God's love visible might look like in this particular time and place.

And what I love about the process of imagining how our building and block might evolve to better serve our mission, is that that process includes higher level values that you articulated, such as — and these are the words you used most to describe Calvary: community, welcoming, historic, outreach, love, downtown, inclusive, music, open, caring, acceptance.

But those values have to end up down here on the ordinary end of life to matter. We hope they end up one day in the form of entrances people can find and pews spaced for actual human bodies and hallways you don't have to drop breadcrumbs to find your way back out of. We hope they show up as spaces where all sorts of people can feed and clothe and sing and learn and pray and eat and worship and encounter one another in all the ways a Christian community planted right here in downtown Memphis is called to do in the years to come.

The project is about making love visible. It's about making love specific and tangible and real, because one thing that Jesus showed us over and over again is that love that doesn't make its way into the real, into the ordinary, into embodied life on earth isn't love at all. It's not the love of God, at least.

I should probably say clearly here that Jesus did not tell me, when the two of us were out fishing the other day, that he wants Calvary to have a capital campaign and that he wants you to give generously to it. It would have been ever so helpful if he had.

But if the love we see in Jesus is material, embodied, tangible love, we have to have that very love in view, when we consider the material, embodied, tangible aspects of our common life. Because what we want is for people to see and experience the love of Jesus here in ways that are as visible as 153 fish and a charcoal fire when they come to Calvary, don't we? People do have that experience here every single day, thanks to your commitment to it. But maybe not thanks to the fact that they have to walk across a potholed alley that leads to our beloved maze of hallways and locked doors. If you can't walk through walls like Jesus, it can be hard to find your way in here. Have you noticed that?

What we've heard clearly from you, in words and in actions, is that we want every person who steps onto our block or into our buildings to see things arranged in ways that say they are welcome here, that they are seen and that they matter here, that this is a place of inclusion and acceptance and prayer and beauty and joy, not one of barriers and obstructions.

Friends, even in the wild old gospel of John, redeeming love comes fully alive, not only in the realm of the Eternal Word, but in the ordinary material of daily life.

And the question the risen Christ still presses upon you and me, at home, at work, in our everyday relationships and tasks and priorities and ministries, and in our life as a Christian community trying to live out the way of Jesus in this city in which life is hard and full of too many barriers and obstacles for too many of its people ... the question Jesus still presses upon us in all the concrete particulars of our lives, is, when a stranger or when a friend shows up here, in this place, will she see, even in the ways we've arranged things in anticipation of someone like her, evidence that somebody cares? Maybe even that somebody loves her. Maybe even simple, physical expressions, in their own right, of the deeper truth that Somebody loves us all.