

SERMON – DECEMBER 6, 2020: “All”

They are all asleep, thank God. My ‘helpmate’ is snoring gently in our marriage bed, oblivious to all that I will have to do. He looks so peaceful, and I begrudge him this, so I consider sneaking into the bathroom and pocketing his razor. He will want to shave when he wakes up, and then have a long leisurely shower, as the comforting smell of the fresh-brewed coffee I am about to make percolates throughout the house. If I take his razor, I will deny him that pleasure. He will search for it angrily for about 30 seconds, and then remember that I keep spare ones for my legs in the medicine cabinet -- single blade, pink disposable razors. He won’t like the pink. And the single blade will cut him. All I need to do to start his day off wrong would be to pocket that razor. Serve him right I think gleefully. But, of course I don’t. I look at my husband’s peaceful face, and thank God that he is oblivious to my pain, there is no need to spread it around.

I stand in the kitchen, overwhelmed by all that I have to do. Because of COVID, all of us – the whole family – is shackled up in the house all day, all night, every week, every month. My husband has always worked from home, but not me. Before COVID I used to escape to my legal aid office, meet with my clients, consult, show up at court, and fight for them. Now, I zoom with them from the kitchen table, between the meals I have to cook for everyone, and the laundry I have to do, and the vacuuming and dusting, and floor washing, and refereeing.

With all of them here, it is not just all the work that overwhelms me. It’s the hullabaloo. The pandemonium. The roughness of this time. The difficulty of being a mother, keeping my family lifted up, comforted. It is hard to speak tenderly the way they need their mother to speak tenderly to them, when their mother is as anxious, and harried and impatient and angry and flustered about the news as they are. It is hard to be the comfort my family needs. It is hard to be the peacemaker.

Kyle and King in their tiny room, still sleeping in bunkbeds, even though they are six foot four now, no longer boys, all arms and legs, young men, who were supposed to be at first year university this year, in residence, having the time of their lives. Now they are cooped up in this house, zooming into school, submitting assignments online from the crappy home office we set up for them in our damp and dingy basement, bitterly disappointed, squabbling with each other and the girls.

My youngest, Hope, now in grade 10, has chosen to do remote learning as well. She seems to be coping about the best, although I worry about her. She has always been a rather otherworldly child, quiet and withdrawn, content with her own company. I worry that this isolation is just exacerbating her strange, otherworldly tendencies.

But it is Abby, who makes everything toxic. She graduated from college in the spring and was supposed to be in France working as an au pair. Instead she has been holed up here with us, without a job, watching Netflix, eating junk food, depressed, totally at odds with herself, and with us. Abby fights with me. She upsets Hope. She comes between me and my husband. She encourages rifts between Kyle and King. She takes the carefully balanced peace I am trying to maintain in this house of cards, where we are all on top of each other, where nothing is the

straight and reasonable way that we had planned it to be, and bends it out of shape, taking the anxiety that gnaws at each of us and twists it up a notch.

Last night she melted down. All of us were crammed into the living room. We were tired. It had been a long day. My husband had suggested that we watch one of the new episodes of *The Crown*, and we had turned it on eagerly. We watched Charles courting Diana, enthralled. Even Kyle and King were attentive. But then, click, the program stopped. Abby had taken the remote, and started scrolling through other programs. This is lame. This is boring. Look at us, holed up in this house, watching a show about a loser couple, that ends in tragedy. It's pathetic. We're pathetic. We are like Aunt Betty, across the street, living small lives, stuck in our house, fearful, binging on Netflix and popcorn.

"What do you want to watch?" I asked her.

"Nothing," said Abby.

"What would you like to do?" I asked Abby.

"I don't know!" she snapped. "All I know is that if I have to live another day like this all cooped up in this house with all of you, I am going to go bonkers!"

"What makes you think you are not bonkers already?" quipped Kyle.

And with that Abby imploded. I thought she was going to break something, or put her fist through a wall.

"Come on honey, I'll make some of that tea you like," I suggested. "Let's have a chat."

In her room Abby's tears started to really flow. "There is no privacy," she snuffled. "Everyone is on top of each other. And you are all so irritating. Toilet seat is always up. Sink is a mess. Dad slurping his coffee. Kyle and King forgetting to put their underwear in the laundry basket. Hope always underfoot. There is no room to be. It's all crammed, and tight, and annoying."

"I should be out there. Meeting people. Dating. Working. Saving up for a new apartment. My life has stopped."

"I know honey," I told her, "I know."

And that was really all I knew.

"When will it stop?" she asked me.

"I don't know honey."

I held her in my arms until she cried herself to sleep. And then I tucked her into bed and kissed her on the forehead.

Thanks Mom, she said.

I'm your Mom, I told her, any time.

I stare out the kitchen window. It is a gray November morning. The wind is lashing the trees in the backyard. I realize that a heavy sleet is starting to fall. Perfect. Poetic fallacy is not appealing to me this morning. I sigh. A day that does not look like the way I feel would be nice, I tell God. "Just for a change, you know God, would it hurt you to send us some sunshine," I mutter. I turn on the radio. The announcer is talking about the record number of COVID cases in Ontario. And then there is a call-in segment. I listen to people whining about vaccines that have not yet been approved, how terrible it is that we have to wear masks, and how closing churches in Manitoba is a charter rights violation. A restaurant owner starts crying, confessing that he is bankrupt.

I turn the radio off. I need coffee. Strong coffee. I take the beans out of the freezer, and pour them into the grinder. I switch the grinder on. The sound of the blade whirling amongst the beans grounds me. I put a coffee filter in the machine. I fill it with the fresh ground coffee. I sprinkle some salt over the grounds, and a shake of cinnamon. I pour cold water into the reservoir, and press the on switch. The button glows a pretty red.

I empty the dishwasher. I set the table. I put out cereal, and milk and yogurt and fruit for my family. The coffee machine blusters and sputters. I start to smell the rich aroma.

I listen to my family awaken. I know that today will be another COVID day. It will be another day with challenges. I know that as a mother my job will be to take this crooked time and make it straight. To smooth out the wrinkles. To be non-anxious, in spite of my own anxiety. To be peace. To be Christ's peace.

COVID will end. I know this in my heart. My job is to make sure that this family gets there. My job is to prepare the way for my family. To keep everything on track. To keep the peace.

I pour myself my first coffee of the morning. I listen to my family stirring. My heart fills with love for them.

I take my husband's razor from my pocket.

I better slip it back into the bathroom before it is too late, I say to myself.

But instead I stand at the window looking out into the November storm, and decide to keep it pocketed. "What's peace," ask myself, "without a little spice?"