

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH

Sunday February 6, 2022 – 5th Sunday After The Epiphany

WORSHIP FOCUS: “Worthiness”

I fell in love with her courage, her sincerity, and her flaming self-respect. And it’s these things I’d believe in, even if the whole world indulged in wild suspicions that she wasn’t all she should be. I love her and that is the beginning of everything. - *F. Scott Fitzgerald*

1st LESSON: Isaiah 6:1-8 (NRSV)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

2nd LESSON: Luke 5:1-11 (NRSV)

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.

He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”

When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”

When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

THIRD THING: “Sonnet 29” by William Shakespeare

When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven’s gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

REFLECTION: “Go Away. Leave Me Alone.”

The Apostle Paul wrote of faith, hope and love, and assured us that of these three, one was the greatest – love. Love is certainly great. Confusing. Life-altering. Joyous. Exciting. Terrifying. Full of anxiety. Something to be proud of. And something to sometimes hide from. Suffocating. Liberating.

Love is many things. A great many things.

In Christianity, love is held in such high esteem, that for most of us it is the lens through which we read scripture and interpret scripture. We read scripture for signs of God’s love for us, and for Creation. And in Jesus, the man who is God, and who loves us, we are taught to love others as ourselves. Indeed, we often speak of Jesus as love incarnate.

And yet, sometimes in our reading and interpretation of scripture we can make this love a little bit too facile. A little bit too easy. A little too much like a lacy Valentine. We listen to the words of Paul’s great poem about love from 1st Corinthians: “*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres,*” and we whip up some frothy and sugary concoctions in our minds and make love the statue of a bride and groom standing on top of a beautifully decorated wedding cake.

If truth be told, love is a lot greater than this. There is something so wild and powerful and dizzying about love, that it can’t help but terrify us, at the same time as it reaches out and to us with radical trust and acceptance. “*Love is a stranger in an open car,*” Annie Lennox from the Eurythmics sings, “*tempts you in and drives you far away. Love is a danger of a different kind to take you away and leave you far behind. It's savage and it's cruel and it shines like destruction comes in like the flood and it seems like religion. It's noble and it's brutal it distorts and deranges and it wrenches you up and you're left like a zombie.*”

Truth be told, love is many things and its greatness lies in this diversity.

Love is like the headlights of a car – like God’s face turning to each of us and shining on us. And, how we feel about that searching, penetrating, all-knowing, all-accepting light is, well – complicated.

Love is great. But it is never simple. And certainly never easy.

We are reminded of this fact in the character of Simon Peter. In our reading for today, it is common to focus on Jesus' admonition to Peter to leave his boat behind and instead become a fisher of people. We talk about what that call might be like for us, and other followers of Jesus. We consider what it means to fish for the souls of others. And it can all be a little academic.

What we do not often consider is that moment when Jesus turns his penetrating gaze on Simon Peter – and us – and asks us to put out into the deep water of love and let our guard down and open ourselves to the love that Jesus offers us.

And that is too bad, because what Peter does when this happens is interesting and so very often true. He falls down at Jesus' feet and says, "*Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.*"

Love is great. It is so great that when it confronts us, many of us flinch. We refuse to accept it. We sense that we are not worthy. Like Isaiah when he is confronted with God's love for him, we say in our hearts, "*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a person of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!*"

When love comes calling, the beloved, using the language of The Song of Songs, arrives like a gazelle, leaping, seemingly perfect, pure and so very, very superior to us. And the natural thing to think, as we are being swept up in the idea of this glorious vision, is to wonder, "Why?" as we compare and contrast ourselves with this glory, this perfection, this wonderful offer which always seems to be too good to be true. We ask ourselves if we are worthy.

Like Shakespeare in our opening poem for today, Sonnet 29, in the face of love, we are often tempted to evaluate ourselves in the harsh light of fortune and men's eyes, and start to calculate all the things we are not, and we wonder – as Mary wonders in our Advent scripture – how it might be that this love is with us, magnifying us, crying out in us, searching our darkest secrets and shames and still – in spite of everything – loving us? How is it that we can find the strength in ourselves to accept that love, and trust it? How can we take that beautiful risk? How can we open ourselves to the powerful change and transformation that love offers us?

Simon Peter is one of the disciples about whom we know the most. He is the disciple who is the most troubled by his love for Jesus, and Jesus' love for him. When Jesus calls him he does not feel worthy. As he follows Jesus, he questions Jesus' love for him, and tests it repeatedly. He wants to be the one who Jesus loves the most. He regrets not being the one who Jesus loves the most. He squabbles with the other disciples about how much he and they are loved. And he constantly tries to prove his love. He makes promises to Jesus that when he is put to the test, he will remain faithful. And he fails the test. He is an uneasy passenger in the open car that Jesus is driving towards the cross and Jerusalem.

And yet, he is loved by Jesus. He is worthy. In spite of his failure to truly accept the love that Jesus gives him as fully as he might, he loves Jesus well enough to become the rock, the foundation – the cornerstone of the Christian faith.

All of us are a little bit like Peter. All of us are a little uneasy about the love of God that will not let us go. All of us relate to the Advent prayer in Voices United that we pray every year – "Who are we, O God, that you should come to us?"

When love comes, we are none of us worthy. When love comes there is part of us that wants to run away in terror. And there is part of us that eagerly wants to turn and listen to the voice of the beloved. There is a part of us that hungers desperately to take that beautiful risk, to love -- again -- even though we may have been burned before.

Carl Sandberg, one of my very favourite poets wrote these words in a prose poem called "I love you."

I love you for what you are, but I love you yet more for what you are going to be. I love you not so much for your realities as for your ideals. I pray for your desires that they may be great, rather than for your satisfactions, which may be so hazardously little.

A satisfied flower is one whose petals are about to fall. The most beautiful rose is one hardly more than a bud wherein the pangs and ecstasies of desire are working for a larger and finer growth. Not always shall you be what you are now. You are going forward toward something great. I am on the way with you and therefore I love you.

This is God's love song to us. This is the Master's sea shanty that calls us to leave our boats and our nets. That so desperately and enticingly and terrifyingly wants to sweep us up.

Faith, hope and love. The greatest of these is love. The love of God. Love itself. No wonder it is terrifying.

"Not always shall you be what you are now," the voice of the beloved sings to us. "Like Simon Peter, you will be changed," it assures us, "so much so that you might even become someone totally different, as Peter becomes the rock."

When Jesus calls us to follow him, his siren call of love is this: "You are going forward towards something great. Your unworthiness is not important: who you are becoming in this process of love is. I am on the way with you and therefore I love you."

The open car is waiting. Love is beckoning you. How far are you willing to let it take you away?