



St. Mary's
Episcopal Church

October 17, 2021

Message by Rev. Michael Burke

Delighting in This World

Here. Now. As It Is. As You Are. As We Are.

Working toward God's Dream

For Everyone. For Everything. All the Time.



"This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

- *Jesus, in John 15:12*

"*Let love be genuine ...*"

- *Paul, in Romans 12:9*

As we begin this morning, let's just take a moment and name where we are. This past weekend, we surpassed 725,000 deaths due to COVID-19 in the U.S.¹ That's more people than live in Alaska.² 595 Alaskans have died.³ Worldwide, almost 5 million people have lost their lives due to COVID in less than twenty months.⁴

I'm not sure what to do about that, actually, other than to grieve and to pray. But it feels like somebody needs to say those numbers right out loud. It all feels a little surreal to me sometimes. Yesterday, I'm out in the yard doing the most mundane of tasks – in this case, raking up the leaves, and it occurs to me that we are all doing seemingly ordinary things, and all in the midst of this enormous slow-rolling pandemic of a lifetime. At least, we *hope* this is the biggest pandemic of our lifetime. It all feels so huge and I feel so small.

Here's a startling fact: We have lost more Americans who have died due to COVID-19 in the last 20 months, than the total number of combat deaths in every war of the United States from the Revolutionary War to Afghanistan. That includes almost 215,000 combat deaths on *both* sides during the civil war, 53,402 U.S. combat deaths during from WWI, and 291,557 from WWII. Plus all of the Korean, Vietnam, Gulf, Iraq, and Afghanistan wars.⁵

And rather than pull together as a nation, like we did during times of world war, we are fighting today over the most inane things. Simple public health measures, like wearing a mask in public, have become surrogates for symbols of liberty, or oppression, or some other stand-in for a cultural war that I profess I do not even understand. How did something so neutral, so innocuous as a mask ignite such partisan conflict?

I grew up the youngest son of a military veteran. Every Memorial Day as a child, from the time I was old enough to walk, I went with him and laid flags on the graves of American vets. I was raised to understand what those deaths meant. Spouses without partners; children growing up without parents. I grew up in a small America town where we all knew the names of the young boys who would never come home from Vietnam again; leaving only a wall in Washington engraved with their names. I was raised to understand the preciousness of life. I was raised not just to believe in liberty, but also that liberty is costly,

¹ See: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html>

² Alaska population is 724,357; See: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/states>

³ See: https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#trends_totaldeaths|tot_deaths|select

⁴ 4,893,358 as of Saturday morning 10-16-21. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-cases.html>

⁵ Total U.S. Combat deaths, 1775-2019 = **666,441+** Note that these figures are COMBAT deaths, not deaths from all causes See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_military_casualties_of_war

and that liberty without responsibility is meaningless. I was raised to believe in shared sacrifice, for the well-being of all. Even when that loss seems overwhelming and senseless.

And it has never, in the last forty-five years, felt more senseless than right now.

Families are divided; parents and grandparents not speaking to their adult children; plans being made now about Thanksgiving gatherings that have, for some, broken down over negotiations about who is and who isn't willing to be vaccinated.

And a lot of this division is being whipped up by preachers and churches over on the "other side of the Christian tribe." I read a sermon yesterday in which the preacher said that, in essence, you can either trust God or trust the Vaccine – you choose.⁶

And it was followed by a train wreck of bible verses all completely out of context strung together like a bad dream. Like a nightmare. And people fall for this stuff thinking somehow that it is faith.

And I'm the guy who is supposed to stare into his computer screen on Sunday morning, and see you all in little boxes on Zoom, and offer some words of encouragement or counsel. Some wisdom from the past.

And I got nothing. I'm feeling just a little bit stung by all this chaos and loss.

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But I've been reading this book by John Pavlovitz, titled *"If God is Love, Don't Be A Jerk: Finding a Faith That Makes us Better Humans."*⁷ He begins the book by suggesting we all "Google" the phrase "You Only Had One Job," and what comes up are all these images, memes, pictures of people who installed the entrance hardware to a door on the *inside* of the door by mistake, or who mis-spelled the word "STOP" on a stop sign, or who put up a sign saying "One Way" with the arrow pointing in the wrong direction. How you ever seen anything like that? Things have leave you scratching your head, wondering how in the

⁶ See: <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/05/covid-19-have-faith-in-god-not-in-vaccine/> for an example of this sort of theological nonsense.

⁷ "If God is Love, Don't Be A Jerk: Finding a Faith That Makes us Better Humans, by John Pavlovitz, Westminster Know Publishing, 2021 ISBN 13: 978-0-664-26684-4.

world did they manage to do something that stupid. It makes you want to track down the guy who did this, just to ask them “How in the world???? You only had one job...”

And John writes, “Sometimes I feel that way with the Christian faith.” Jesus taught many things, but they all keep coming back to one central teaching. Love God / Love your Neighbor / Love yourself. Love.

Followers: You had one job! Love.

There is no bait and switch. The Gospel has been proclaiming that one central truth for thousands of years. Its not some modern invention. There’s no bait and switch. Love One Another.

Its like the ONE THING WE HAVE TO GET RIGHT.

Here in the midst of this highly polarized culture, let us Love One Another. When everybody all around you are up in arms about what they say are “the heavy hand of government mandates,” remember your one job: Love One Another. When I get all “judgy”⁸ about people who are putting everyone else’s lives in jeopardy by their irresponsibility, selfishness, and foolishness, I need to remember, “Love One Another.” And that includes the people I disagree with.

Pavlovitz has written a whole book about what it might mean for us to “Love One Another.” In it, he talks about how sometimes privilege separates us from the reality of other people’s lives and gets in the way of being loving. He addressed how its OK to be angry, in fact, he writes of how our desire to “just be nice” can keep us from being audaciously compassionate – which he defines as “Christ-like.” Still, he says, that’s no reason to be a jerk.

In his book, “God is Love; Don’t Be a Jerk”, (there, I said it again so you could remember it) he says that we need a love that looks like Jesus. And is fierce and audacious and bold and courageous. A love that will not be tone-policed into making nice with discrimination.

A love that looks like Jesus is a love that doesn’t apologize for its passion for humanity.

⁸ Yes, “judgy.” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/judgy-adjective-meaning-judgmental#:~:text=Judgy%20is%20an%20adjective%20that%20is%20on%20the,to%20judge%20harshly%22%20%28as%20in%20%22%20judgmental%20classmates%22%29.>

A love like Jesus that doesn't wilt when it is labelled "too political"

A love that looks like Jesus is dangerous to injustice, confronts ugliness and welcomes turbulence.

But be incredibly careful that when you are angry, that it is directed at the right menace, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way.

Never ever forget, followers of Jesus, that we have one job – ONE JOB – and it is to deeply, passionately, courageously, fiercely, loudly, LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

And let Love be genuine. Even, maybe especially, in a weekend when the numbers of the sick and the dying and the dead just keep piling up.

In a culture of divisiveness, mean-spiritedness, with overworked health care employees and delivery personnel, exhausted parents, and stressed-out children and youth, all wrapped up in fear, ignorance, a pervasive loss of hope and staggering, just staggering amounts of loss,

Perhaps the bare minimum of what we can do is to treat people for what they are: "worthy of the same love, respect, dignity, joy, and opportunity" as we ourselves are.

"If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your^[a] faith;
if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach;
if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously;
if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good." (Romans 12:6b-9)

Feed the hungry. House those on the street. Pray for the troubled. Reach out to those who are ill or living in isolation. Welcome the stranger. From the headlines to the finish line, resurrect hope.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the indwelling Holy Spirit of God.

Kick at this present darkness until it bleeds daylight.

And Love. Through it all and in it all, dare to love... ...anyway.

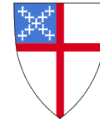


You only had one job

SOTP in the name of love!



Scripture Readings chosen for October 17, 2021



The Collect

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

The Epistle

Romans 12:1-9; New International Version (NIV)

¹Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ²Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—God's good, pleasing, and perfect will.

³For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your^[a] faith; ⁷if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead,^[b] do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.

The Gospel - Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."