

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” Or as Bob Dylan famously sang, “I become my own enemy in the instant that I preach.” Nevertheless, for a little while longer at least, I’m a preacherman and I have one more sermon to preach. Famous last words. And so once more, I become my own enemy and run the gauntlet of stricter judgement.

So what shall I say? Mostly, I think, what I’ve been saying for the past sixteen years or so; recurring themes that have been becoming clearer and clearer – at least to me. Plus maybe one or two nuances and new insights just for today, before I go hence and am seen no more. Essentially, I want to explore for a few moments four things:

Firstly: What we mean by “God is love.”

Secondly: Nothing is ever what it seems.

Thirdly: Faith as imagination in the construction of reality.

Fourthly: The energy of prayer and the peace of the world.

Sounds like four sermons rather than one, but I’ll do my best to keep it concise. For me, it all connects, and I hope it will for you too.

“God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.” As anyone who has ever attended a wedding or a funeral or memorial that I have taken will know, this verse from the First Letter of John is probably my favourite Bible verse. God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. It seems to sidestep theology, such that no matter what you happen to think about God, whatever you believe about God, if you know love in your life, human love, then you have been touched by the divine. Simple really. It reduces everything to love. All you need is love.

But what do we mean by this? What do we mean by “love,” and what do we mean by “God is love”? Obviously (I hope), we are not just talking about warm feelings of mutual attraction, it’s more than emotion and self-interest, more than friendship or common interest, it’s more active than passive. It’s about wanting the best not just for those whom we naturally love (though they are a good place to start), but wanting the best for others, for the stranger, for all; and what we *want* has to do with our *will*. And the will determines how we direct our energy. It is about action.

If we say (and believe) that God is love, one thing we are saying is that God’s energy and action in our lives (God’s grace) is directed to our greatest good, our becoming, our emerging, blossoming even, into the people (the creatures) that God is creating us to be.

But God’s energy and action, God’s love, God’s grace, God’s will is not something that is simply directed at us. Rather it works in us and through us, so that loving one another in this active-not-passive way is how we grow into the people God is creating us to be in the divine imagination. Remember the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit* – the toys in the playroom become real by being loved by the children – we become real through being loved; we are loved into reality. Churches,

including this one, are really schools to learn and practice the art of love. It has to do with the will – what we want and how we choose to direct our energy and action. As Scott Peck says in *The Road Less Traveled*, the opposite of love is not hate (which is actually a distorted form of love), but rather the opposite of love is laziness. A lack of will, a lack of energy and action.

But nothing is ever what it seems. Whatever it is we are going through in our lives, the circumstances we are in, the challenges we face, these are the contingencies of our lives, the specifics through which we become who we are. So often, what is going on in our lives is like the stage set for a play, but the real action, the drama, the story, is what happens in here (in the heart), in how I am and act, and in who I am and am becoming in those situations. All of us in our lives experience success and failure, joy and pain, triumph and tragedy, sorrow and loss. All of us make many mistakes – the question is, do we learn from our mistakes? Do we hear the voice of wisdom crying out in the city streets and squares? The outcomes of each specific scenario, in the end, are less important than what they do to us: how we are transformed through our experience of life.

This is what I think “those who want to save their life will lose it” is all about. And “those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the good news [in other words, for what is ultimately most important], will save it [or find it].” As I look back over the years, it sometimes seems to me that the person I remember myself being at different times in my life no longer exists, seems like another person, an identity with which I no longer identify. It seems I have lost many selves. But the self that is lost is not the same as the self that is found. (Not that I am laying any great claim to have found myself; I remain perhaps more lost than found, but I look forward to the adventure of self-discovery that lies ahead.) The selves that are lost are the personalities, the characters that we play and portray in this drama of life. *The self that is found is the actor behind the masks of persona, who knows what the play is about and who remains present even (especially) when the character in the play is lost in the plot.*

Another major theme I have returned to again and again over the years has been the role of the creative imagination in our construction of reality. For me, this is what faith is – rather than *belief* in a set of propositions or doctrinal statements. Remember the Canadian Anthem for the 2010 Winter Olympics – it was “I Believe” in the English version; in French, though, it was not “*Je Crois*,” (as you might think) but “*J’Imagine*” – *I Imagine*. Our faith expresses what we think life is all about, and therefore how we order our lives, our goals and priorities, where and how and why we direct our energies. It’s not static, not something we simply react to, but something that we construct through our creative imagination.

The world as we imagine it to be is the world we inhabit; the reality we construct is the reality with which we have to deal. If you believe/imagine that God is an angry God full of judgement and vengeance, then that will be your reality, and that will find expression in how you live your life and the person that you become. Likewise, if you believe/imagine that God is love, that also impacts who we are and how we live our lives. But faith as creative imagination is not only about the construction of reality in terms of how we perceive and experience life, but it also *changes* things. Just as the universe came into being through Divine Imagination, created in (and out of)

God's imagination, creation is still unfolding, still becoming, and *human* imagination is part of that process of ongoing creation – for good and for ill.

This is where what we call prayer comes in, which I have come to see as a kind of spiritual force or energy that impacts, influences and changes things. But it's not straightforward, and it's not simple, it's not a case of simply imagining a better outcome and, hey presto, here it is. I believe/imagine that we *all* have this spiritual energy, this creative imagination – whether we pray or not – it's part of being human. But it has to be harnessed and directed, otherwise it remains unrealized or is susceptible to being hijacked by the creative imagination of others, whereby we construct our reality on the basis of how others construct their reality. That may be good or bad, depending on how they construct their reality, but it is not our reality, or rather it is so only by association; somehow we are not present, we have become lost. Again.

So rather than letting our spiritual energy simply leak out all over the place in an uncoordinated way, dissipated or, worse, subjugated by the spiritual energy of others, we must become present, wake up (once more), take hold of this capacity that lies within us, given to us by the God who is love, this power, this spiritual energy that is part of what it means to be human, created in (and out of) God's imagination.

As I look out at the world, in all its turmoil and confusion, mindful of the scenes we see for example unfolding in Afghanistan, and as we mark the twentieth anniversary of 911 yesterday and wonder if anything has actually changed, and we continue to see all the suffering, all the displaced people running and hiding in fear, as we witness all the anger and cruelty and violence, the disease, the hunger, the inequality and injustice, and we may ask how can this be, why does the God who is love allow all this? Why can't people simply get along with each other? Why all this struggle and strife? As we look out on the world and see all this, I'm asking myself, what is the answer?

Is there an answer, we might be tempted to ask. Some may imagine that there is no answer, but that this is just how things are, this is how the world is, has always been like this and always will be, until the end of the world. But what if that's not the case? What if there is an answer and it lies within us and among us, what if it's right there close at hand? Imagine that. As people of faith, we claim to believe in the power of prayer, but sometimes I wonder whether we really do believe that – whether I really believe that. What would happen, I wonder, if we were able to really harness and direct this spiritual power of the creative imagination in a coordinated and ever increasing intensity?

We say we long for peace. Peace for the world. Peace for all people, peace between all people. We say we believe in the power of prayer. What would happen, I wonder, if people all over the world really started to pray for peace? Simply pray for peace. Imagine that. Imagine a world where people everywhere directed their intentions and spiritual energy for peace. Whatever religion or culture, whatever nation and language; whether they consider themselves to have faith or no faith, as human beings we all have this spiritual energy of creative imagination; we all have longings and intentions.

Imagine. Give peace a chance. That's all I'm saying.

Perhaps it's already begun – recall some years ago, I quoted Barak Obama saying to a Canadian audience that the world has never been healthier, wealthier, better educated, more tolerant and less violent than it is right now. Not that there is any room for complacency – far from it – we have a long way to go, but perhaps there is reason to be hopeful, and more than this to add our own spiritual energy into the mix: pray for peace.

And if we commit to pray, I suspect we'll find that you cannot really pray for peace without actively working for peace; in the world, among the peoples of the world, reconciliation and healing in our nation, in our neighbourhoods and communities, in our homes and families. And working for peace of course means working for justice. For, as we all know, there can be no peace without justice. What this will mean and look like for me as I embark on this new journey in my life, I don't know; that's for me to figure out, just as it is for you too. But asking the question is a good first (or next) step on the road.

Angus Stuart
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