



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens
Episcopal Visit to St. John Squamish
Proper 4 Year C, January 30, 2022
Jeremiah 1: 4-10; 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13; Luke 4: 21-30

It is great to be with you here at St. John the Divine, Squamish this morning. I have so many wonderful memories of this building, this parish community, and this town of Squamish. Both of my children were born while we lived here and this continues to feel a part of my home. I am grateful for the ministry that has continued to take place since I left here in 2001, it is hard to believe it was that long ago. I am grateful for the ministry of Cameron as your rector. Cameron possesses a huge array of gifts and talents and I know that you appreciate all of them. He is a fine priest, pastor, and companion for your spiritual journey. I am delighted that he is here and for the work that he is doing. But I also thank all of you for your ministry and dedication to living out the gospel each and every day. This time of pandemic has been very hard for you, I know. Trying to pivot and keep everyone safe but also continue to be the Church has been a challenge to say the least. This community of Squamish is blessed because of what you do. Thank you.

Some of you might know the name of Dorothy Day. If you don't know that name the very short synopsis of her life is that Dorothy Day was an American journalist who became a Christian social activist, helping to found the Catholic Worker Movement. She became known for her justice campaigns in defense of the poor, the forgotten, the hungry and the

homeless. She espoused nonviolence, and hospitality for the impoverished and downtrodden. She lived a social gospel focussed on living out a deep compassion that reflected what she saw in Jesus Christ and his concern for the poor and marginalized. Her faith somehow caused her to understand that the love and grace of God was far more expansive than she had first understood.

I tell you this because I was reading an article about her the other day in *The New York Times*. The article, written by Liam Stack¹ described that there is a movement afoot to ask that Dorothy Day be canonized as a saint in the Church. Dorothy Day died in 1980 but she continues to influence lives and perspectives and understandings about God. In that article George Horton, who is urging that she be acknowledged as a saint, is quoted as saying: “we call her a saint for our times because she gives us a way back to unity. She crosses all the divisions in our society and our government and our church, and she calls us back to the essence of the Gospel. I think that is what is recognized by church leaders.”

Interestingly Dorothy Day herself never wanted these accolades. “Don’t call me a saint,” she once said, “I don’t want to be dismissed that easily.”

She is also quoted as saying: “We have all known the long loneliness, and we have found that the answer is community.” “Food for the body is not enough. There must be food for the soul.” “I really only love God as much as I love the person, I love the least.” Dorothy Day clearly had a way of challenging people to consider what is at the heart, what is at the soul, what is at the centre of life. In the article in *The New York Times*, a priest, the Rev. Anthony Andreassi is quoted as saying, “One thing about Dorothy Day that I love is that she makes everyone uncomfortable.”

It was these words used to describe Dorothy Day in her bid to be a saint that struck a chord with me: “she makes everyone uncomfortable.” For it seems reminiscent of the story of Jesus we heard in the gospel reading just a few minutes ago. We heard: “When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove Jesus out of the town, and led him to the brow of hill....” Suffice it to say that they were angry at Jesus, furious, apoplectic even. How dare he, they were asking. Now remember these were the people of his hometown. People who knew him growing up. Clearly, he touched a nerve and made them feel incredibly uncomfortable.

So, what did he do or say that was so awful? Well, he spoke about outsiders being not only included but honoured. He spoke about how in a drought Elijah went to a widow at Zarephath and not among the local faithful followers. He spoke of the healing of Naaman who was not from around there. Jesus, clearly wanted to preach about a much more expansive grace of God than was often considered. He wanted the people of his hometown to see that a narrow understanding of God led to a narrow understanding of life. God had a compassion that was far reaching, Jesus was saying. Listen deeply within the world for the presence and wonder of God and recognize the Holy Spirit of God swooping into many places that might be beyond our consideration.

¹ Was Dorothy Day Too Left-Wing to be a Catholic Saint? By Liam Stack in *The New York Times* January 21, 2022

If you remember from the reading last week, it was this same day and Jesus was at the synagogue and read these holy words from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Beautiful words, stirring words from Isaiah but words that are best left in the holy book because to enact them, to have this Spirit of the Lord rest upon us as it was on Jesus, means not gentle polite answers for our world but rather answers that seem to be in competition with the slant the world seems to take. Where too often the stranger is feared, the oppressed are kept that way, the poor pushed to the sidelines and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour is seen as threatening. Dorothy Day seemed to know this well.

In the letter to the Corinthians, St Paul writing to a divided and conflicted community phrased it this way: Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way... It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." He said, "And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." These words are often read at times when we want to consider love, sometimes romantic love or familial love. And that is beautiful. But if we scratch the surface just a little bit on these words from St. Paul, we realize very quickly that these were not idle, warm fuzzies but a challenge and a hope for us to live, explore and enact. They are actually words to make us feel uncomfortable; that the love of God is greater and broader than we might think. And that we are called to live out this love, not just appreciate the beauty of these words on the page.

I was given a copy of an obituary not too long ago. A tribute written after the death of Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk, teacher, committed follower of Christ and guide. This is how that description of the life of Thomas Keating began: "For the past century and more, many people have assumed that God is absent. The Massacres of two world wars, the atrocities of the Holocaust and the gulags, have occurred despite the supposed existence of a divine source of love, truth and compassion. If God was there, his silence seemed to condemn him to irrelevance. Yet the life-work of Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk for 74 years and abbot for 20 years of St. Joseph's Monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts, was to teach that this very silence was God and that through silence God could be reached." "Thomas Keating had to go beyond the monastery walls and teach laypeople, battling with daily life, his way of silence... He instructed his listeners, naturally enough, to sit comfortably and close their eyes... A sacred word, "Lord," perhaps, or "Peace," would recall the mind to rest if it strayed... For contemplation was not a static thing, but a dynamic encounter."² Thomas Keating, of this obituary, once said: "God will bring people and events into our lives, and whatever we may think about them, they are designed for the evolution of God's life in us." He once said: "To live in the presence of God on a continuous basis can become a kind of fourth dimension to our three-dimensional world, forming an invisible but real background to everything that we do or that happens in our lives."

² Obituary: Thomas Keating died on October 25th written on December 22, 2018 in *The Economist*

It was, perhaps, this fourth dimension that Jesus was urging people in that synagogue long ago to see for in it we come to recognize a breadth to God's grace and love and forgiveness that goes far beyond the limitations we might want to put upon it. It created a lot of anger. But ever since many others have continued to come to know this expansive vision of God, this much greater understanding of God, this love of God that goes far beyond narrow boundaries. Dorothy Day knew this. St. Paul knew this. Thomas Keating knew this. May we too discover this so that we recognize that the Spirit of the Lord is upon us that we too may be part of bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, both physically and spiritually. For faith, hope, and love abide and the greatest of these is love. May it be so.