

Love is the Beguining By The Rev. Mother Marycelis Otero - Romans 13:8-14

Good morning, St. Timothy's.

I have imagined this moment in a hundred different ways; driving to church, lying awake at night, sitting with these readings until they sat with me. And now here I am, standing in front of you for the first time as your Associate Rector, and the only word I can find to begin with is "gracias, Charles." Thank you. Thank you for trusting me with this pulpit. Thank you St. Timothy's for receiving me and for beginning something new, together, on this particular morning.

I want you to know a little of how I got here; not the resume version. The real one. I come from Boriken, Puerto Rico, from a people who know how to survive a Category 5 hurricane and still throw a party the next morning, who know how to grieve loudly and love louder. My family's story, like so many of yours in one way or another, is a story of crossing: crossing oceans, crossing languages, crossing from one life into another, and trusting that God was crossing right alongside us. I have spent my ministry with my hands in that same work. I have sat in hospital rooms where families received the worst news of their lives. I have embraced survivors in the first fragile hours after rescue from their trafficking, translating not only words but grief, not only language but the fragile beginnings of hope, so that people who felt unseen could finally be heard by someone. I did not come to ordained ministry by a straight road. I came to it the way most of us come to anything that truly matters: by being broken open enough to let God in through the cracks of my soul.

And now God has brought me here. To you. To this beloved community. On the first day of a new chapter for both of us. A year ago you did not know my name. I did not know your children, your story, your joy, the particular way this parish laughs together. And yet here we are, beginning. And let me tell you, this parish's love found me before I ever said a word from this pulpit.

We drove thirteen hours straight from the Diocese of Atlanta, at the ragged end of a week spent shedding ten years of living out of one house and into boxes. We rolled in running on gas station coffee, with two teenage boys who had finished every snack in the car by hour six and were now staring down an empty cooler like it had personally wronged them. And there, waiting for us, was proof that our sister Gene and a small army of St. Timothy's ladies had raided coffee hour on our behalf: the fridge was full.

My boys did not so much eat as dive, face-first, into cheese and grapes and roll sandwiches like they had stumbled onto manna in the wilderness.

Nobody had asked them to do that for us. Nobody sent a bill. They simply decided, before they had properly met us, that we already belonged to them, that our boys' hunger was their business, and that the most important people in my life deserved a safe, full table the moment we crossed the threshold.

I did not earn that refrigerator. I did not earn Gene showing up with love already prepared for people she had never once sat across a table from. But that, church, is Romans 13 wearing an apron and holding a casserole dish. That is what it looks like when somebody decides to love you first, before you have done a single thing to deserve it.

Which is exactly why I am grateful the lectionary handed us this passage on this day of all days. Because Paul, writing to a fractured and anxious young church in Rome, is doing precisely what we are doing this morning: beginning again, and asking what that beginning should be built on. Listen again to how he starts. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another."

Paul opens with the language every one of us knows :what's owed, what's due, who's settled up with whom. And then he does something clever with it: he clears every ledger on that list, except one. Not because love is a debt to be settled, but because love was never meant to be settled at all. It isn't a bill you pay down until it disappears; it's a gift you keep choosing to give, on purpose, for the rest of your life, because that is who you are slowly becoming.

Notice, too ,Paul doesn't list love as one commandment among the ten. He says love is the commandment that swallows all the others whole. You shall not murder, not steal, not covet all of it, he says, collapses into a single sentence: love your neighbor as yourself.

Not because the other commandments stop mattering, but because love, honestly practiced, cannot help but keep them. You cannot love your neighbor and steal from them. You cannot love your neighbor and lie to them, or envy them, or turn your back on them in their need. Love is not the easy substitute for the law. Love is the law, finally grown all the way up.

That is not sentimental. It is not a greeting-card line stitched onto a pillow. Paul is handing a divided, quarreling church a church arguing over calendars, over food, over who belonged and who didn't , the most demanding command there is: stop measuring what's fair, and start asking what love requires of you.

And then Paul does something I love. He looks at his watch. "Besides this," he writes, "you know what time it is. Now is the moment to wake from sleep." The night is far gone. The day is near.

I want to say that to us this morning to you, and to me. We know what time it is. Something is beginning. Paul tells us what to wear for it: the armor of light the kind that welcomes first, loves first, and never makes anyone wait to belong."

I come today with an invitation to you and from you to me: to enter together into what I can only call a holy curiosity: Wondering out loud what beautiful new thing God is already doing in this community, and asking how we might join it. Love, in this passage, isn't something you dispense once you understand each other perfectly. It is something you choose to practice while you are still learning, still curious, still asking questions, still discovering who your neighbor is and what they most need from you.

So here is what I believe this new beginning invites us into: not a program, not a year and a half strategic plan; those will come in their season, born out of listening first.

God is calling us to something simpler in this season: to meet each other with wonder instead of certainty. That when a new family walks through those red doors nervous and unsure where they belong, we treat their belonging as already decided, the way Gene and my beloved ladies decided about my boys before the car was even in park.

That we go looking, together, for the beloved children of God who need us most, the overlooked, the weary, the ones this world has been too busy to notice, and let their need reorder our priorities.

That we stop asking "have we always done it this way," and start asking "what is God doing here now," because holy curiosity, not certainty, is what a beginning like this actually requires. Let's put on the armor of our Lord Jesus Christ, Paul says, the way a person gets dressed in the morning, deliberately, one arm at a time, because there is somewhere to be and someone to become.

That is what I am asking of St. Timothy's this morning, and it is what I am asking of myself: that we get dressed in Christ together, every day of this new season, curious and unhurried, until it stops feeling like something we put on and simply becomes who we are.

I think of this new ministry together, in the way new parents wait for a child to be born: preparing a room, choosing a name, and loving and praying for someone before you have ever seen their face. That is how long I have waited for this ministry to be born in my life. And now, holding it for the first time, I feel the same trembling gratitude every new parent knows, that I experienced with both my sons, not because I have it all figured out, but because I already love what I do not yet fully understand, and I am ready, so ready, to learn.

The night is far gone. The day is near. And whatever comes next for this family of faith : the joys we haven't had yet, the grief we haven't carried yet, the children not yet baptized, and the saints not yet buried. I believe God has brought us into this beginning on purpose, together. So, St. Timothy's: let us enter this new season with holy curiosity, wondering out loud what God is doing among us, and giving ourselves to the ones who need us most.

That is the invitation I want standing between us: a door held open, a warm cup of cafesito, a table already set, a place already prepared, the way this parish set one for my family before we had even arrived. Let's spend our lives together, curious and grateful, looking for the beloved of God who needs us the most.

Amen.