

“‘Less than golden-hearted’: The Gospel According to Dave Matthews”  
 Palm/Passion Sunday C (April 14, 2019)  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Extend your grace to us, and help us to extend that same grace to ourselves. Amen.<<

Last week was a week of anniversaries. Thursday, April 11th was the anniversary of writer Kurt Vonnegut’s death. The website Brain Pickings did a tribute to Vonnegut by quoting from his many commencement speeches.<sup>1</sup> Vonnegut was apparently one of the most sought-after commencement speakers of all time. One of his most notable commencement addresses was delivered at SUNY Fredonia in 1978.

In that speech, Vonnegut began playfully by offering the graduating students a series of trite pieces of advice: “I suppose you will all want money and true love, among other things,” he said. “I will tell you how to make money: work very hard. I will tell you how to win love: wear nice clothing and smile all the time. Learn the words to all the latest songs. What other advice can I give you?” he continued. “Eat lots of bran to provide necessary bulk in your diet.” Then Vonnegut passed on a piece of advice his father gave to him: “The only advice my father ever gave me was this,” Vonnegut told the graduates, “‘Never stick anything in your ear.’ The tiniest bones in your body are inside your ears, you know - and your sense of balance, too. If you mess around with your ears, you could not only become deaf, but you could also start falling down all the time. So just leave your ears completely alone. They’re fine, just the way they are. . . . That’s about it,” he said. After this, Vonnegut made to leave the stage to awkward, is-he-serious?, laughter from the crowd. Then he continued, “I am being so silly because I pity you so much,” he said. “I pity all of us so much. Life is going to be very tough . . . . And the most useful thought we can hold when all hell cuts loose . . . is that we are not members of different generations . . . . We are all so close to each other in time that we should think of ourselves as brothers and sisters. We are all experiencing more or less the same lifetime now.” Vonnegut continued by talking about relationships and marriages. “[Relationships and] marriag[es] [are] collapsing because our families are too small,” he said. A [person] cannot be a whole society to [another person] . . . . We try, but it is scarcely surprising that so many of us go to pieces. So I recommend,” he concludes, “that everybody here join all sorts of organizations, no matter how ridiculous, simply to get more people in [their] life. It does not matter much if all the other members are morons. Quantities of relatives [and friends] of any sort are what we need.” And then he ended with this bit of advice: we need to expand our circle of relationships even to include people who are different, because, he said, “Hate, in the long run, is about as nourishing as cyanide.”

Last week was a week of anniversaries, not just remembering Kurt Vonnegut, but also remembering Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Tuesday, April 9th was the anniversary of his death - Bonhoeffer the pastor, theologian, and activist in 1930s Germany, who once said, according to his biographer Eric Metaxas, “silence in the face of evil is evil itself. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

The anniversaries of Bonhoeffer’s and of Vonnegut’s deaths grabbed my attention this week, because we’re entering Holy Week - a week when we remember the death of Christ on the cross. Today’s service begins with waving palms and ends with a litany of the passion - from

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/05/12/kurt-vonnegut-if-this-isnt-nice-fredonia/>

celebration to cross in an hour or so on a Sunday morning. We've also taken in new members today, which reminds me of Vonnegut's commencement advice to "join all sorts of organizations" "to get more people into our lives" to "expand our circle of relationships" and, ultimately, to do our part to offer the world an antidote to hate - to not be silent, but instead speak and act, to paraphrase Bonhoeffer. Offering a different kind of Christianity is increasingly becoming the mission of churches like ours in this time - this time when discourses of hate and violence trickle down, or are Tweeted down, from the highest offices in our land in our time (this past week, in fact); and more and more actions are fueled by hate, like those in southern Louisiana where three African-American churches were burned recently.<sup>2</sup> We might boil the culture of First Congregational Church of Ithaca down to a simple phrase: welcome everyone, care for those in need, and live in love - a cultural statement, a spirit, or, maybe better, a way of being that counters discourses and acts of hate and violence in our time. Or, maybe we can boil FCCI's culture down even more to: we're just trying to follow the example of Jesus - a basic theology that is the foundation of a question we ask of all new members: "Will you, as best as you are able, work with us in the spirit of Christ to create a better world for all people?" New members, and by implication all of us, answer, "We will." I love how vague the statement is: "create a better world for all people." It's vague, because it is an invitation to each of us to explore what this might mean in our own spheres of influence: in our families, our relationships, our offices, in the businesses we run, the classes we teach, the research we conduct, the care we can provide, the marches we participate in, the lobbying or letter-writing we might do, how we, as a congregation, make this brick and mortar building available for use to our community, week-to-week and year-to-year. "Will you create a better world for all people?" Will you *create*? Will you *be creative* in making this world better?

Until I started writing this sermon, I hadn't really considered just how creative Jesus was when fashioning a better world, especially as his life neared its end. Consider the story we call the Triumphal Entry - one of today's gospel readings. Luke - the gospel writer - presents Jesus as creatively orchestrating his entry into Jerusalem, as the gathered crowd chanted "blessed is the king" and waved their palm branches - symbols of deliverance. To bring this *entry* about, Jesus, says Luke, sent two of his disciples to find a colt in a village near Jerusalem, untie it, and bring it back so he could ride it into the city. Luke is careful to point out that this taking-of-the-colt is not stealing; it's merely borrowing. Jesus even gives the disciples charged with this task an explanation to share with anyone who asks to justify their taking of the colt: "if someone asks why you're taking the colt," says Jesus, "just tell them, 'the Lord needs it.'" Apparently this explanation suffices to convince the owners of the colt to loan it out, for when they catch the disciples in the act of untying their colt and hear the explanation - the Lord needs it - Luke doesn't recount any objection from them.

It's a creative gesture, this riding a colt into Jerusalem during the season of Passover - Passover, that ancient Israelite celebration of being delivered from oppression in Egypt. The old Hebrew prophet Zechariah, centuries earlier, had spoken of Israel's future king riding humbly into Jerusalem "on a colt" to bring salvation to the people. Like a DJ remixing an old track, or like a cover band playing a familiar song, Jesus creatively covers and remixes Zechariah's "song" from the past; but like any good DJ, this remix comes with a creative twist that makes it different. Jesus, the king-on-a-colt, goes out of his way in the gospels to redefine the kingdom he brings. It won't have swords, and it won't have spears; it will,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/suspect-was-caught-louisiana-church-fires-fear-lingers-n993926>

rather, hammer swords and spears into plowshares, into farming tools. It won't destroy; it will build. Earlier in Luke's gospel, Jesus is asked by the religious leaders about his kingdom: "when is it coming?" they ask eagerly. To which Jesus replies, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will anyone say, 'Look, here it is! Or 'There it is!' For," says Jesus, "the kingdom of God is within you." And, when Jesus is on trial before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate in John's gospel, Pilate asks him, "Are you a king?" To which Jesus replies, "My kingdom is not of this world." And when the crowd gathers to greet Jesus as he rides on a colt into the city, singing "blessed is the king!", they do so, says Luke, to celebrate "the deeds of power they'd seen Jesus do." The expectation was electric: would this great healer, this doer-of-miracles, perform a greater miracle and drive the Romans out of Jerusalem? No one could have expected that this king-on-a-colt was, as one writer put it, walking a death-row march to the cross. The cross. That symbol of divine love. Love on display. God's climactic, creative act of self-sacrifice: stretching out divine arms on a Roman cross to embrace all people without exception, and show that love not hate is the most powerful force in the world. "The world moves for love," said a poet. "[The world] kneels before [love] in awe."<sup>3</sup>

Some modern songwriters like Dave Matthews have captured this core truth of Christianity. His song called *Christmas Song* tells the story of Jesus from birth to cross. It begins with Mary and Joseph. "She was his girl; he was her boyfriend," sings Dave Matthews. Then the song talks about baby Jesus: "A surprise on the way, any day, any day. One healthy little giggling dribbling baby boy." The song then talks about Jesus' life, how he stretched out those arms of love to embrace: "The people he knew were less than golden hearted," sings Dave Matthews. "[His followers were] gamblers and robbers, drinkers and jokers, all soul searchers, like you and me." The end of *Christmas Song* focuses on the cross. "When Jesus Christ was nailed to his tree," sings Dave Matthews, "[he] said: ... Father up above, ... in [the midst of] all this hate, [you] have ... fill[ed] me up with love, love, love ... ." The gospel, writes Rachel Held Evans, in her book *Inspired*, is not about keeping people out, but about letting all people in - it's about acceptance, embrace, forgiveness, and grace offered to all who are "less than golden hearted," as Dave Matthews sings: "the gamblers and robbers, drinkers and jokers"; the "soul searchers, like you and me."

In his book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, Father Gregory Boyle, a priest who served in South Central Los Angeles among the gangs and drugs, writes about the power of love that accepts people no matter who they are or where they're at in life. In one place in that book, Father Boyle writes about images of God. "God can get tiny, if we're not careful," he writes. "I'm certain we all have an image of God that becomes the touchstone, the controlling principle, to which we return when we stray. My touchstone image of God," he says, "comes by way of my friend and spiritual director, Bill Cain, S.J. Years ago he took a break from his own ministry to care for his father as he died of cancer. His father had become a frail man, dependent on Bill to do everything for him. Though he was physically not what he had been, and the disease was wasting him away, his mind remained alert and lively. In the role reversal common to adult children who care for their dying parents, Bill would put his father to bed and then read him to sleep, exactly as his father had done for him in childhood. Bill would read from some novel, and his father would lie there, staring at his son, smiling. Bill was exhausted from the day's care and work and would plead with his dad, 'Look, here's the idea. I read to you, you fall asleep.' Bill's father would impishly apologize and dutifully

<sup>3</sup> This comes from a film: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dc0\\_zXwAHj8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dc0_zXwAHj8)

close his eyes. But this wouldn't last long. Soon enough, Bill's father would pop one eye open and smile at his son. Bill would catch him and whine, 'Now, come on.' The father would, again, oblige, until he couldn't anymore, and the other eye would open to catch a glimpse of his son. This went on and on, and after his father's death, Bill knew that this evening ritual was really a story of a father who just couldn't take his eyes off his kid. How much more so God?" asks Father Boyle. And then he ends with these words: "God would seem to be too occupied in being unable to take Her eyes off of us to spend any time raising an eyebrow in disapproval."<sup>4</sup>

...Maybe this is the most powerful message of Christ's life, Triumphal Entry, and death on a cross. It's a message of "love, love, love," as Dave Matthews sings. Of loving arms stretched out on a cross to embrace all of the "less than golden hearted" folks: "the gamblers and robbers, drinkers and jokers"; the "soul searchers, like you and me."

Let me close this morning with a poem written by a former gang member from Los Angeles that speaks in practical terms about how to make the world a better place for all people:

*"Admit something:  
Everyone you see, you say to them,  
'Love me.'  
Of course you do not do this out loud;  
Otherwise,  
Someone would call the cops.  
Still though, think about this,  
This great pull in us to connect.  
Why not become the one ...  
That is always saying ...  
What every other [person] in this world  
Is dying to  
Hear."<sup>5</sup>*

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 17.