

“Being Formed in the Image of Love Incarnate”  
 Proper 8A (June 28, 2020) - COVID-19 (Sunday 16)  
 Scripture: Psalm 139:1-18; Romans 8:38-39; Matthew 8:5-13  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Love, give us simpleness of faith, clarity of mind, and singleness of heart that we may stand firm and see clearly and be sustained, through Christ we pray, Amen.<<

The late Rev. Peter Gomes, the minister at Harvard’s Memorial Church, wrote a book back in the 90s that really is essential reading. The book he wrote was about the Bible, and it was appropriately titled *The Good Book*.<sup>1</sup> In his book – in his great book – titled *The Good Book* about the “good book,” the Bible, Peter Gomes spoke personally about being a progressive, black, gay, Christian minister who wrestled mightily with the ancient language of the Bible and with how interpreters over the centuries have put the Bible to use for good and bad ends. *The Good Book*, Gomes’ book about the good book, the Bible, talks about issues like: the Bible and anti-Semitism, the Bible and gender rights, the Bible and queer rights, the Bible and inclusion, the Bible and suffering, joy, evil, temptation, wealth, science, and mystery. And after rereading chunks of *The Good Book* about the good book, the Bible, this week I was reminded of just how good a book *The Good Book* is.

In *The Good Book*, which is a great book, Peter Gomes also talked about the role of the good book, the Bible, in American history. “The first book printed in New England on the seventeenth century press of Harvard College,” wrote Gomes, “was the Bible. Our presidents,” he said, “are sworn into office on the Bible, and oaths in court are taken on them. In the culture wars,” he said, “we argue about the place of the Bible in our civic society, and politicians quote from the Bible in justification of their policy positions on moral questions.”<sup>2</sup> The good book, the Bible, said Gomes, is imbued with such power in many sectors of society that even “reprobates,” he said, like W. C. Fields could be found thumbing through it on their deathbeds. “When [Fields’] doctor came in to see him,” wrote Gomes, “he found Fields leafing furiously through a huge Bible. Surprised at such a sign of piety ... , the physician asked, ‘What are you looking for?’ [Fields replied], ‘loopholes.’”<sup>3</sup>

After Peter Gomes had become the minister at Harvard’s Memorial Church, a generous benefactor wanted to give whatever was needed to fill the Memorial Church pews with Bibles. “No particular translation was specified,” wrote Gomes, “and no objections were made to the Revised Standard Version. Before proceeding too far along the road of this benefaction,” he said, “I felt it wise to take the advice of some colleagues, and I found their reaction to be apprehensive, and in fact quite suspicious of the motivation behind the gift. ‘What does the benefactor want or expect?’ I was asked. [And I was] warned that placing Bibles in the pews would create an invitation to steal them. Further, I was warned that ‘people will think that this is a fundamentalist church. If they see Bibles in the pews,’” said these wary voices, “‘you will have an image problem.’ My colleagues and counselors meant well, I knew,” said Gomes, “and [they] wished only to protect the church from secular and religious zealots. These concerns notwithstanding, however, we accepted the gift, placed the Bibles in the pews, and, happily,” he said, “over the years we have lost quite a few to theft.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Gomes, *The Good Book*, 53.

<sup>3</sup> Gomes, *The Good Book*, 138.

<sup>4</sup> Gomes, *The Good Book*, 3.

Part of the reason why Gomes accepted the gift was that he loved the Bible, and he wanted those who attended services at Harvard's Memorial Church to be able to hold it in their hands and read it for themselves. He loved the Bible, the good book, in spite of the fact that this book has been used in American history as a bludgeon to justify slavery, to undercut women's liberation, to condemn queer people like himself, to promote anti-Semitism, and to make people question whether God loves them. Gomes loved the Bible, as I love the Bible, not because it could be wielded as a club to beat and bully, but because the Bible is also a powerful tool to uplift and inspire and liberate and teach us all how to be formed, as the New Testament says, into the image of Christ – which is the image of love. In a 1992 op-ed in the *New York Times*,<sup>5</sup> Gomes wrote that “the same Bible that the advocates of slavery used to protect their wicked self-interests is the [same] Bible that inspired slaves to revolt and [inspired] their liberators to action. The same Bible,” wrote Gomes in that op-ed, “that [was] used to keep white churches white is the source of the inspiration of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the social reformation of the 1960s. The same Bible,” wrote Gomes, “that anti-feminists use to keep women silent in the churches is the [same] Bible that preaches liberation to captives and says that in Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free. And the same Bible,” wrote Gomes, “that on the basis of an archaic social code of ancient Israel and a tortured reading of [St.] Paul is used to condemn all [queer people, is the same Bible that] includes metaphors of redemption, renewal, inclusion, and love [for all people].” Metaphors that call all churches to open their doors and affirm – not just welcome, but affirm – our LGBTQ+ siblings in faith. Gomes knew, as all biblical interpreters know, that the same Bible that can be used as a club is the same Bible that can inspire us to love – to become more like love, which is to say, to become more like Christ – to be formed into the image of Christ, who was the embodiment of love. Gomes was fond of quoting that Edwin Markham poem about the circle of love, using the poem as a guide when interpreting the Bible. The Edwin Markham poem goes like this: *He drew a circle that shut me out – heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But Love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle that took him in.*<sup>6</sup>

Today's scripture reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the most beautiful passages in the entire New Testament. It's about love. It's about a love that can't be beaten no matter what is thrown at it – a circle of love that is wide but also impregnable and as invincible as God. Paul writes that he's “convinced” about the power of love. Nothing can separate us from love, he says – the “love of God, which is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Nothing can separate us from love, says Paul. Nothing can penetrate the circle of love that God draws around each one of us: not heights or depths, says Paul. Not present or future hardships. Not earthly rulers who hold office for a few years and then fade from memory. Nothing in all of creation, not even death, says Paul, can separate us from God's love. Paul's language soars in these two verses from Romans – two of the most gorgeous verses in the entire New Testament.

Two verses that make me think of today's gospel reading from Matthew. I love how the four New Testament gospels talk about love through the medium of stories – taking something abstract and making it concrete. In today's story, Jesus encounters an “other” – a Roman Centurion, an officer in the army, a representative of the occupying imperial force, an enemy to be hated and shunned. Jesus loves the enemy in this story. The Roman Centurion is desperate when he approaches Jesus. “Lord,” he says to Jesus, “my servant is sick and needs

<sup>5</sup> <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/national/19920817-gomes-re-read-your-bible.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Gomes, *The Good Book*, 165.

help.” The Greek rendition of his words expresses desperation. He implores Jesus; he pleads; he begs; we might even imagine him on his knees, tears in his eyes as he begs Jesus for help. Isn’t it strange that a Centurion – an officer in charge of dozens of elite Roman soldiers – isn’t it odd that a Centurion with such authority and power would approach a peasant rabbi from Nazareth for help, begging and pleading in desperation? Why would this Centurion care so much about a mere servant? Our NRSV English translation fails us here. It translates the Greek word as “servant,” but the actual word the Centurion uses is much more intimate. It’s a word that could mean servant, but it could also mean attendant; it could also mean family member; it could also mean lover or boyfriend. This is the way Greek historians like Thucydides used the word. It’s an intimate word. The Centurion loves this person he’s asking Jesus to heal. Loves him intimately. “Please,” he begs Jesus, “heal my boyfriend, because I can’t stand to lose him.” Jesus responds bluntly and compassionately – Jesus who is love incarnate, the very persona of God, of Love, on earth – Jesus responds with a mere four words in Greek: “I come heal him,” rendered into English as, “I will come and heal him.” Jesus doesn’t judge the Centurion. He doesn’t ask for clarification. No, Jesus draws a wide circle of love to include even a Roman Centurion. He draws the circle of love wide enough to include the Centurion’s partner. And after being wowed by the Centurion’s faith, Jesus says, “Go, it will be done according to your faith.” The boyfriend was healed in that very hour, says Matthew. Jesus, love incarnate, “had the wit to win. He drew a circle of love that let him in,” to borrow again from poet Edwin Markham. “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,” wrote St. Paul.

Friday was the fifth anniversary of the Supreme Court decision that said the 14th amendment grants same-sex marriages in all 50 states. And last week the Supreme Court ruled that the 1964 Civil Rights Act protects gay and transgender workers from workplace discrimination. “An employer who fires an individual merely for being gay or transgender defies the law,” Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote bluntly.<sup>7</sup> Please, said the begging Centurion, heal, accept, welcome, affirm, my partner. And of course, love incarnate – Jesus Christ – grants his wish, because nothing, wrote St. Paul, can (or should) separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When it’s at its best, progressive religion – progressive Christianity – “uplifts human beings,” as Dr. King wrote in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” It uplifts every human being, seeing every human being as a child of God – telling every human being that they are beloved; they are precious; they are cherished; they matter; they have value and worth and are worthy of love, because God – the divine potter – has specially made each one of us; knit us together; painted our lives on a canvas; penned our lives in a grand novel that speaks of our worth and value and belovedness. Each one of us is God’s artistic masterpiece – God’s Sistine Chapel, God’s Primavera, God’s Mass in B Minor.

God crafting each person as a masterpiece is a theme in today’s Old Testament reading from Psalm 139. Psalm 139 is one of the most exquisite bits of poetry in the entire Bible. The Psalmist speaks personally. “You have searched me and known me,” he writes. You have explored every millimeter of me, and you know me, as a lover knows their partner. To “know” in Hebrew is life-partner language. You know every detail of me, O God, as a partner knows the one they live with, says the Psalmist. You *know* me. You know my rising up and my laying down. You know my routines. You know what I will say before I say it.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/us/gay-transgender-workers-supreme-court.html?referringSource=articleShare>

You know the micro-details of my life. You know my quirks and my habits, my thoughts and my motives. You know it all, because you created me, you knit me together, you molded me like a potter, you painted me on a canvas, you sculpted me like a sculptor. You made me – you made *me* – your masterpiece. And you love what you created. If you have time today, I would urge you to go back and read Psalm 139 vv. 1-18, but read them as if *you* were the one speaking the words. Listen to what God is telling you. *You*, child of God, are loved, just as you are. And God – Love, as the New Testament calls God – Love, loves you more than you can even comprehend. A love that the poet in Psalm 139 says is “too exalted to even grasp with the mind.”

God is good, wrote Peter Gomes, and each one of us is created in the “image of goodness itself. We are cast from a perfect die,” said Gomes, “and the imprint is on us, and it cannot be evaded or avoided. God made us,” he wrote, “in the image of goodness, and goodness itself is who and what we are, and God pronounced it good, and hence it is good, because, as [someone once] said, ‘God don’t make no junk.’ What God makes is good,” said Gomes. God didn’t make a mistake when she created you. She loves you as a perfect mother loves her child. You are a masterpiece. And the purpose of the Christian life is to be formed into the image of that love, the love that Jesus – who is love incarnate – lived and modeled and exemplified.

Let me close today with a story that some of you already know. It’s a story told by Rev. Tom Troeger when he preached at the memorial service of Matthew Shepard – the gay man who was murdered on October 6, 1998. Rev. Troeger told a story about children playing in the school playground. “Half the children would form a circle, lock hands, and face outward,” says Troeger. “The other half of the children were outside the circle. The ones in the circle would chant, ‘You’re out! You’re out! You can’t come in. You’re out! You’re out! You can’t come in,’ and then the children outside would rush as hard as they could and try to break through.” Troeger admits that he always seemed to be on the outside, unable to break through, until one day a girl named Louise winked at him as the children chanted, “‘You’re out! You’re out! You can’t come in.’” When Troeger rushed toward the circle to break through, Louise dropped the hand of the boy next to her and Troeger got in. The boy next to Louise was outraged, saying, ‘You can’t do that! If you do that, *everyone* will get in!’” Troeger ended his sermon by saying, “‘God is like Louise.’” Amen.

### **Announcements**

- \*Flowers in memory of Ray Edwin
- \*Letter on Friday about re-opening
- \*AfterWord today at 11:15am
- \*Wednesday continuation
- \*Parking Lot Hymn Sing next Sunday, July 5th