

There it is again: the tenderness of God on display
in the compassion and action of Jesus the Christ.

Now, some of us here this morning,
grew up hearing a lot about the wrath of God.
The fire and the brimstone.
The God who is watching and waiting to catch you out.
And I understand
that kind of preaching has a long history in the west indies
and our churches here in America.

But beloved, this morning the scriptures are singing a different song.
This morning,
God sounds like a mother calling her child home for supper
before the sun goes down.
This morning,
God sounds like an old man on a porch, eyes straining down the road,
watching, waiting, hoping you will turn the corner.

It is the tenderness
that welcomes desperate women
who take their healing into their own hands
women who, by the rules of their day,
had no business being in the crowd at all.

And yet there she is:
reaching, stretching, touching the hem of his garment.
You know that woman, don't you?
She is your grandmother who kept praying
when everyone told her to give up.
She is your auntie who kept going to church
even when the church had not always been kind to her.

She is every one of us
who has ever reached out to God
in a moment of absolute desperation and said,
"Lord, if I can just touch something..."

It is the tenderness that receives irrational fathers
fathers who insist that daughters can be raised from the dead,
even when the mourners are already in the house,
even when the professional grievors have arrived with their wailing.
In our culture, we know about death.
We know about the nine-night and the rum
and the hymns sung low on the veranda.
And we know what it means when someone says
it is finished.
But this father
this beautiful, stubborn, undignified father
pushes through the crowd
and falls at Jesus' feet.
And Jesus does not call him foolish.
Jesus goes with him.

It is the tenderness
that calls disciples who have acted as traitors
to their own occupied people.
Matthew... Levi...
sitting there at his tax collector's booth.
In our context,
imagine someone who worked for the colonial masters,
collecting from their own people
to fill the pockets of those in power.

Nobody invited him to Sunday dinner.
Nobody was proud of him.
And yet Jesus looks at him and says simply: "Follow me."
Not "clean yourself up first."
Not "prove yourself worthy."
Just: follow me.

And then... oh... and then...
Jesus has the boldness,
the beautiful audacity,
to go and eat dinner at Matthew's house with all of Matthew's friends.

Tax collectors and sinners, the text tells us.
The kind of gathering that "nice" people
would cross the street to avoid.
The kind of gathering
our grandparents might have warned us about.
And Jesus sits down, pulls up a chair, and breaks bread.

***"Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'
For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."***

There it is. Beloved.
Right there in Jesus' own words.
He came for the ones who know they need him.
He came for the ones the rest of the world has already written off.
He came for us.

So with all this evidence
all this attentive... transformative... healing love...
right here in the Gospel this morning...
why do we find it so hard to engage with divine compassion?
Why is it so hard to do the work of disciples?

The work of discipleship is this:
learning and living,
in an ever-deepening level
a seen-in-our-daily-lives... actionable level...
that God is love... that we are loved...
and that the only path to wholeness and fulfillment
is the *doing* of that love.

I say "doing love" because love is a verb.
It is not a feeling that comes and goes like the trade winds.
It is not a word you say on a Sunday and forget on a Monday.
Love is something you do.
It's what we're made for.
It's just that simple... but not at all easy.

It sounds wonderful!
Falling further into the endless depths of God's tenderness
and sharing that with all others.
But how exactly are we supposed to do that?
How do we do that...
when so much in our experience has told us a different story?

Some of us were raised in homes
where love came with conditions attached
where affection was given as a reward
and withdrawn as a punishment.
Some of us grew up in churches
where the pulpit was used more as a courtroom than a sanctuary,
where select Bible verses were wielded like a cutlass
to cut people down rather than a lamp to light their way.
Some of us have watched fifteen minutes of the evening news
and felt the walls closing in
all that violence... all that injustice... all that pain.

We've been told *This is love*
when we were actually experiencing... *control*.
We've heard words that were meant to dehumanize
dressed up in the language of Scripture.
We've received punishment
when what we needed was restoration.
And beloved,
it is very, very hard to believe in the tenderness of God
when the people who claimed to represent God
were not tender with you.

In our first reading... we heard...

*"For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."*

This is what the prophet Hosea was trying to tell the people
long before Jesus arrived:
God is not impressed by religious performance.
God is not moved by how loudly you sing or how long you pray
if your heart is closed.

What God wants... is *steadfast love*
that deep... rooted... unshakeable love
that shows up not just on Sunday morning
but on Tuesday afternoon when someone needs you.

The knowledge of God... not information *about* God
but the *intimate knowing*... of someone you walk with every day.

And Psalm 50 reminds us

"Call on me in the day of trouble;

I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."

God says: *just call*. Just *show up*. *Come as you are*.

Now, if there is anybody here this morning

who has been blessed to have had

all your family and friends

always love you well —

if no one has ever rejected you or treated you cruelly,

if no inexplicable tragedy has ever visited your house

then please, feel free to rest in gratitude,

because God has been extraordinarily merciful to you.

But this portion of the sermon is for the rest of us.

This is for those of us who have had people in power

use shame as their primary tool of motivation.

This is for those of us who were taught

that your worth was tied to your productivity

to how hard you worked,

how much you produced,

how little trouble you caused.

Many of us come from traditions

where you were expected to suffer in silence

and call it faith.

Where asking for help

was weakness.

Where needing anything

was something to be ashamed of.

This is for those of us
who have suffered the weight of systems built to diminish you —
racism... sexism... colourism... classism... ageism...
those ugly arrangements of power
that tell some people they are worth more than others.
Those of you who grew up under colonialism
know something about being told your history does not matter,
your language is inferior,
your culture is something to be ashamed of.
And when the church stood beside those systems
instead of against them, the wound cut doubly deep.

Beloved,
none of that was from God.
Not one word of it.
And you do not have to carry it anymore.

The Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans
that Abraham... the father of our faith...
received the promise... not because he had earned it
not because he had performed the right rituals
or said the right words,
but simply because he *trusted God*.
He believed... *even when belief seemed absurd*.
He believed... when his body was "as good as dead"
and Sarah's womb was barren.
And God counted that trust...
as *righteousness*.

Paul writes...

*"For this reason it depends on faith,
in order that the promise may rest on grace...*

*Hoping against hope,
he believed that he would become
'the father of many nations'."*

Hoping against hope!

Isn't that something?

That is the faith God honors.

Not the faith of the one who has everything sorted out
who never doubts

who never cries out in the night.

God honors the faith...

of the one who keeps showing up

even when they're not sure why...

who keeps reaching for the hem of the garment...

even when the crowd is pressing in on all sides.

Jesus is inviting us

Gently... persistently... lovingly...

to *unlearn* ways of living

that do not nourish us

that do not strengthen what the Beloved Community can be.

We are invited to lay down unquestioning agreement
with beliefs that have done us harm.

How many of us grew up being told
that when a hurricane came
and swept away your neighbor's house
that was "*an act of God.*"

When a child died of fever...
when the crop failed...
when the boat went down in the storm
"*God's will.*"

Beloved...
we may need to gently... prayerfully.... *reexamine* that theology.

Because the God I see in Matthew this morning
is *not* sending storms to punish fishermen.
The God I see in Matthew is *walking toward* the storm.

We may need to unravel the ways
that harm done to us
by people in the church
has been stitched together
with how we understand
God to act.

The priest who *shamed* you...
is *not* a reliable narrator... of *who God is.*

The member who excluded you
was *not* speaking with *divine authority.*
The family member who used Scripture as a weapon
was handling a sacred text *carelessly.*

You are permitted...
You are encouraged...
To separate those experiences
from the character
of the One who made you
and calls you beloved.

The Jesuit priest and author Gregory Boyle
who spent his life working with gang members in Los Angeles
writes this in his beautiful book *Cherished Belonging*:

"We unlearn what we need to unlearn.
In Jewish mysticism
God's very nature is infinite compassion
and it is this merciful face of God
that is imprinted on the human heart.
God is compassionate and merciful
always and in everything."

Always and in everything.
Not sometimes.
Not when you have behaved yourself.
Not when your theology is perfectly sorted out.
Always.
In everything.

And so...

Jesus calls us to practice this *relearning*.

He invites us to wrestle with the Scriptures... honestly
to ask hard questions of them
not because we are abandoning faith
but because we are taking it seriously

He invites us to the dinner table
of the communion rail
surrounded by the glorious... messy... fallible...
collection of other human beings
who are *also finding their way*.

Here
with the Spirit's help...
we're asked to see the dignity of God
even in the people who challenge us
... not because they have earned it
but because ***God sees it in us too.***

We receive healing as we touch the garment of Christ's story
returning to it... year after year... season after season...
letting it do its slow and quiet work ***in us.***

And as we listen and learn
Jesus takes us by the hand
raising us from the living death of believing
that we are anything less...
than absolutely, extravagantly adored by the One who formed us.

Now, we don't get there all at once.
Nobody wakes up one morning and says,
*"I have now completely unlearned
every lie I was taught about myself and about God."*
This is the work... of a *lifetime*.
But we get there
Slowly... together... by allowing the Spirit to lead us.

We get there
by spending time with God... in prayer...
and as we learn to sit in silence
and let God speak in that still small voice.
We get there through honest, discerning Bible study
the kind where questions are welcome
where nobody has to pretend they understand everything
where we wrestle with the text together
like Jacob wrestling with the angel
refusing to let go until it blesses us.

We get there by building relationships
across the divides that the world has taught us to maintain.
We get there by doing less doom scrolling on our phones
and more hand-holding with the person sitting next to us.

We get there by showing up...
Imperfect... uncertain... still-in-process...
and allowing others to show up the same way.

That woman with the hemorrhage
Didn't wait until she was healed to come to Jesus.
She came to Jesus in order to be healed.

That father did not wait until he had a rational explanation
for why his daughter could rise.
He came to Jesus in his desperation,
with nothing but his love and his need.
And Jesus... always Jesus... went with him.

Come as you are.

Not...

Come when you're ready.

Not...

Come when you have figured it out.

Come. As. You. Are.

The table is set.

There is room.

There has always been room.

I'll be honest with you... *because you deserve honesty:*

This process of relearning...

of receiving and then doing divine love

does not fix everything.

It does not make suffering cease to exist.

It does not give us tidy answers for why life is unfair...

why beloved people experience terrible things...

why our roads to forgiving and being forgiven

look so different from one another's.

The mystery remains.

The pain remains.

The questions remain.

But what we *will receive* is this:
the voice of God... on a very loud... reverberating loop...
playing over and over... in the depths of our hearts... saying:

I am Love.

You are beloved.

You are made to love... and to be loved.

And no matter what...

I will always be with you.

Amen.