

THE SOUND OF LOVE

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB
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Over Christmas, my daughter Allie shared with my wife the following thought: "When Santa sees that you've been bad, he won't bring you presents; when God sees that you've been bad, you have to talk to my Daddy!"

One of the things that strikes me about baptism, and also about Holy Communion, is the fact that they transcend time. Long before any of us in this church were born, the people of St. John's Church were baptizing babies and adults, outside of these walls, and within them, from this very font. We could not count the number of people who have received the waters that for us are a visible sign of God's love active among us, or the times that bread has been broken and wine has been shared from this table, spreading into the congregation of people long gone from this earth, or people who have moved from this city. And to the present day as we gather together for such a sacred moment in which we set aside everything that lays claim on us in this world, our work, our lack of work, our family, our volunteering, our stresses, our bank accounts, and for one moment today we are simply God's own.

And sacred things do happen in this place. Children run up and down aisles burning off energy that is normally reserved for daycare and school because this church is their church as much as it is mine or yours. Visitors come through the door, wonder where to sit and wonder if they have a place in God's story. Choir members come to sing God's love even when they may not feel like it sometimes, or especially when they need to be reminded of it. Some of you sitting here today either feel like you shouldn't be here, or worse, that you are not worthy to partake in the things we do this morning, such as baptize babies and break bread because Jesus told us to do it. And that's just

the thing about baptism and communion, we don't do things in order to receive God's love, we do these things precisely *because* God loves us. We make vows and promises at baptism that we spend the rest of our lives trying to keep - and the only qualification for the table is the one that Jesus himself gave us, that each time we break a simple piece of bread, or lift a cup in the air, that we remember him.

And so we do these things to remind each other not only that God loves us, but that God is *in* love with us.

People at Jesus' baptism heard God's love. What does that sound like for us? It sounds like water dripping. It sounds like bread ripping. It sounds like wine being poured. It's audible and it's incredible. It's to live and work and play in the world in such a way that people can hear God's voice, in their hearts if not their ears, saying, ...this is my beloved child whom I dearly love. With her I am pleased. In him, I find happiness.

There's a great story that goes like this:

Once there was a seeker of truth that came to a saint for guidance and asked, "Tell me, wise one, how did you become holy? Two words; and what are they, please?"

"Right choices."

The seeker was fascinated. "How does one learn to choose rightly? One word. One word! May I have it please?" the seeker asked.

"Growth."

The seeker was thrilled.

"How does one grow?" he asked. "Two words. What are they, pray tell?"

"Wrong choices."

I read once, and I've shared it before, that churches are hospitals for sinners, not country clubs for saints. And each and every one of you here this morning, whether you believe it or not, whether you think you deserve to be or not, are welcome in this place. This New Year's, as we start into 2012 with the hopes and fears of all the years, we start by praising God for the small reminders

and big reminders that we are loved. And here's another starting place for those of you who aren't sure about faith. Years ago, when as students we were mired down in some ancient text with our professor, he said something profound that I never forgot. He said it this way, "Scripture isn't a video tape. But these were real people living real lives with real problems, and maybe we don't know exactly what happened, but we know something happened back then because we're still talking about it." That moment is still echoing into the future, like rock thrown into water, rippling from the centre and spreading.

Some of you know that I have a Twitter account, but I also have another one that I run which is a group of monks. As of this morning, it has 10,300 followers. On Christmas Eve, I tweeted something that got sent around a few hundred times and it was this, "What happens in Bethlehem doesn't stay in Bethlehem." It comes into our hearts.

When we leave this church today, after we stand in the waters of the Jordan, chilly as they may be, as uncomfortable as we are to stand around and let ourselves go under the water, afraid of what people might think with such an act of faith, we leave this church today by going out in public still dripping with baptism. For some of us, the waters of baptism drip steadily into our lives, usually just when we need them, when we need to be reminded that we are loved, or when we need to be reminded that we are not alone. And sometimes, there are moments, especially when we feel submerged into something greater than ourselves, we are able to stand up, and it feels as if the heavens have opened up, and it does seem like the very spirit of God has descended on us because for the first time in a long time, or the first time ever, we know that we are loved by a divine love that will not let us go.

And that should have an impact on how we live our lives, and how we see the world.

Anne Lamott, in her wonderful book, *Traveling Mercies*, writes, "It's funny. I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had

some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience. But then when I grew up, I found that life handed you these rusty bent old tools - friendship, prayer, conscience, honesty - and said, Do the best you can with these, they will have to do. And mostly, against all odds, they're enough."

Leave this church today knowing that you really, and truly, are God's beloved, because you may not hear that anywhere else this week. And if you do hear that message of God's love for you, whether you are standing in line at the bank machine, or you are receiving the biggest hug from a child, sitting in your car at a traffic light, or if a friend simply stops by, then give thanks for that moment, as Jesus said when we do these sacred yet ordinary things, remember him. Because in our baptism, we believe that life is stronger than death.

The Rev. Victoria Stafford, a Unitarian Universalist minister in Minnesota, wrote the following:

*Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope -
not the prudent gates of Optimism,
which are somewhat narrower;
not the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense;
not the strident gates of Self-Righteousness,
which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear
us there; they cannot pass through);
nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of "Everything is gonna
be all right."*

*But a different, sometimes lonely place,
the place of truth-telling,
about your own soul first of all and its condition,
the place of resistance and defiance,
the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it
is and as it could be, as it will be;
the place from which you glimpse not only struggle,
but joy in the struggle.*