

Sermon: Year B, 5 Easter

Texts: Acts 8:26-40

I John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

Part of the genius of Bill Cosby is his capacity to observe and then to comically re-present childhood. By every measure he takes, children are wonderfully inscrutable creatures, at once endearing, baffling, and exasperating, and much of the energy of life is spent by parents who, against all odds, try in solemn tones to rein in their seemingly alien offspring. It's an exercise for which the word "futility" was coined. Cosby is a master of imitation and timing, and his routines are often rapid-fire exchanges between children and parents, common situations stretched to the limits of idiosyncrasy and exaggeration. He knows the true source and sense of hilarity.

A few years ago, at the climax of one of these stories, he suddenly changed the mood, turning from laughter to reflection. Humor had opened a space that he wanted to recognize. He noted that for parents the great unspoken fact about children is that, once born, they are always yours, and, all the more, they are always your *children* – no matter what happens, regardless of how old they get or how ancient you become. The relationship does not change. They are always your children... He paused for a long moment to let this sink in with appropriate gravity, and then he deadpanned, "That's why there's death."

It's a perfectly comic line, built from the deepest contradiction we know. We love our children. We delight in their antics. We rejoice in their happiness and can be astonished by their skills, growth, and success. But no amount of progress on their part ever eliminates our impulse as parents to worry. Nothing allays our anxiety that they could tumble into hardship or suffer grief. To be a parent is never to be freed from this responsibility or from the fretful suspicions that the best of your intentions might, even years later, re-emerge as reasons for guilt, resentment, and frustration. We laugh, but Cosby's point is as sharp as it is subtle. With us, all love has its limits. It can wound as easily as it edifies. And, sometimes, the only true release we have is dying. Escape is relief. That's why there's death.

This line defines us. It also, poignantly, gives more clarity to what God has done for us in Easter. We are told that we are children of God. We should take that analogy more seriously than we do. And as children of God we are no less reckless or rebellious than anything Bill Cosby describes. Our relationship with God can be deeply intimate, and to no less a degree, it can be fraught with confusion. Sometimes we can be quite attentive, but we can also, often, be grossly indifferent.

A dramatic turn in this analogy, however, pivots on Cosby's line. Because for us, death signifies release from our relationships, the possible or, sometimes, the needful relief of breaking away. But for God, death signifies exactly the opposite. It reveals the infinite strength of his embrace. In Jesus, death has become God's way of showing how determinedly his love abides. This one point is critically important for us to see: God has transformed death itself. He has made it the fundamental means by which love comes to fruition.

Because of Jesus' resurrection, there is no longer any breaking away. There is no limit to God's love, no boundary beyond which it does not reach. There is no violation severe enough or horrific enough to escape God's mercy and redeeming. Not even death separates any more, not in singular

tragedy nor in mass calamity. In Christ, it has become the place where grace, with unwavering resoluteness, reigns. Here, at this precise point, love has been perfected. It never tires nor refuses nor rejects nor wilts away... That's why there's death – to show love's true passion, which in God is absolute.

Cosby's line is no longer comic. It's become endlessly beautiful. And thus, by God's action, our laughter can swell into amazement; our enjoyment is increased into rejoicing; and the affection of our own love can be intensified into the experience of God's glory – which changes everything in the world.

One of the difficulties we face is comprehending the enormity of what God has done. We don't have words adequate to the task. Hence the repetitions in the Epistle lesson, the rhetorical circling around. We stumble because of the brightness. Yet one line from John's letter is as good a guide leading forward as any I know. "Perfect love," he said, "casts out fear." We would do well to take this very seriously too. There are no exceptions to this rule. There are no qualifications. The angel Gabriel said to Mary at the annunciation, "Be not afraid." At Jesus' birth, the angels in chorus declared to the shepherds, "Be not afraid." When the women appeared at the empty tomb, the angel comforted them saying, "Don't be afraid." When Jesus met his disciples who were hiding for fear, he said, "Don't be afraid. My peace is yours." This is the fundamental truth of our lives, all the way down and all the way out. God has made it possible for us never to be afraid because he has turned death itself inside out.

Perfected love casts out fear perfectly. And faith is the vibrant work of trusting in God's redemption in the face of all loss and being ourselves God's redemption by imagining and interjecting love wherever fear intrudes.

Part of the genius of Bill Cosby is that by means of humor he shows us something more of the richness of our humanity, most explicitly experienced between parents and children. He helps us peak behind the usual platitudes and the great wash of sentimentalized love so that we can plumb the depths of the real, complex love that forms our lives, and then laugh with true appreciation. We have, as a culture, set aside today to give thanks for the beautiful mystery of mothers. We all have reason to be marvelously humbled by this.

Today is also the Sabbath, and John, in turn, has given us reason to fathom God's love all the more deeply, to the point of divine passion, from which nothing and none of us escapes. It's a message too lightly heard, too seldom reflected by us. As an ugly Op-Ed piece in yesterday's edition of The Day reminds us, the public face of the church for many is nothing but accusation, guilt and threat of condemnation. We must assiduously reject this caricature, which too often we hold even among ourselves, This must be our constant theme: perfect love casts out fear. For the most profound mystery of God's love is that it leaves no room for fear, no room at all. And that, in the tumble of our lives, is a very, very good place for faith to begin – from which, not just laughter but holiness in our lives can emerge. May we be marvelously humbled by this love today no less.

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