

Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Near my alma mater sits a sprawling arboretum on a hill above the Minnesota River. It's beautifully curated and showcases trees from every part of the upper midwest, an old homesteader's cabin painstakingly restored, and a huge pavillion where students of all ages can come learn about conservation and the outdoors. I spent hours and hours there in my late teens and early twenties—walking on winding paths, skipping class, holding hands, talking with friends about trivial things. I remember running out there at 2 am to look at stars and to learn about the constellations—Taurus the bull who captured the seven sisters, and how Orion and his dogs Canus Major and Canus Minor would come to rescue them. The arboretum enchanted generations of students who were learning about life, friendship, and this fragile earth that we all call home.

On March 29, 1998, an F3 tornado tore through the campus and arboretum. Classes were canceled for weeks, and when students and faculty returned, we finished the semester in FEMA trailers. The trees were gone, and in their place was a huge scar on the ground filled with rubble, dirt, and debris. No more arboretum. I quipped at the time that we ought to call it just the etum as there were no more arbors.

The college planted a few fast growing trees and laid new sod, but it wasn't the same. The arboretum was gone.

A few months ago, I had the opportunity to return to campus. It was late September, and Fall was peaking. I drove around on a wave of nostalgia. I hadn't intended to go to the arboretum, but I was on that side of town, so I pulled into the parking lot. The sun was shining, and there was a little bit of chill in the air. I walked over to the pavilion and under the trellis that marked the opening to the arboretum. The rolling river valley hills were bright green, and all the trees were back. The trees were tall and strong and crowned with the reds and yellows of autumn. You could barely see the scar that the tornado had left twenty years ago.

Standing there on that Fall day, I got choked up. I wasn't expecting to, but I ended up walking around, smiling as my eyes filled up with tears—tears of what, I don't know. But I got to thinking later that it might be joy, or nostalgia or, really love. I think that I love that little patch of rural Minnesota. Which seems strange. How can you love a place? It's just dirt and bugs and grass and trees. It can't love me back.

But when I look over those hills, I'm seeing people from a long time ago—some of whom are no longer with us. I'm seeing all the stories of all the students who have walked on those winding trails. I'm seeing generations before me and future generations all using this space. I'm seeing a little glimpse of the kingdom of heaven.

How do you preach on a Gospel reading that houses probably the most famous verse in the bible, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” This is John 3:16, that verse that I’ve seen at baseball games, protests, monster truck rallies, and on every Sunday School classroom poster in America. A famous football player once even painted it under his eyes so that all the cameras would broadcast this verse all over the country. For some folks, this verse is the entirety of the Christian faith—God loves you. Believe it. You get to go to heaven. I bristle at this verse, and I worry that its ubiquity leads to a pale or unexamined faith. I avoid it. But today, we’re going to right into it. And we’re going to lead with love.

What if God really does love this world? What if God looks at every minute of life on this earth from the very beginning and into the future to the very end and loves this world anyway? What if God sees the scars left all over this planet and on its people and has decided to love anyway.? In our Lenten study on Thursday nights, we’ve talked about the nature of God, and the author of our book said that for God not to forgive is impossible because it goes contrary to God’s nature. God cannot do other than to reconcile this crazy world to God’s self. It’s not love like college sweethearts. It’s love that is old and wise and knows what it’s getting into. God’s love of this world is so unfathomably vast that God would lay down God’s life for God’s friends, as it says elsewhere in the Gospel of John.

There’s a beautiful image in the book of Genesis of God walking through the Garden of Eden early one evening. I love that image—God taking a stroll and loving everything that God has created—always knowing that we are not always capable of being worthy partners in that love.

And still, God keeps on loving, keeps on calling our community back into relationship with the divine. Who knows, maybe God cries a little when God walks around the earth.

God’s love is our burden to bear. Being loved that much in all of our shortcomings is something we must learn to receive. But what are we supposed to do with that? How do we respond to a God who really does love the whole world?

The answer for the Christian, of course, is twofold. We go and do likewise. We love as hard as we can, for as long as we can, with every bit of strength as can muster. And not love that’s sappy. Real love. Difficult love. It’s the love that seeks justice in the world for everyone. It’s the love that doesn’t look away when things are hard. It’s the love that might ask everything of us—even our lives. Love one another, as you have first been loved. That’s the message of the Gospel of John, and that’s the message of God to us this morning. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Amen.