

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
February 16, 2020

Many of you have been decades-long friends of Mark Heffron, who died suddenly and unexpectedly Friday night. Others of you only know him a bit from the kind way he invited you to coffee hour or the way he connected you with other newcomers while serving as an usher in his favorite purple sweater. Still others of you, in our growing parish, don't know who it is I am talking about. And even though Mark's death will hit different folks differently, I am going to try to bring all of us into the sermon this morning in the hopes that we will be able to see one another, love one another, and keep ourselves open to the love of God Almighty.

I had planned to be in another pulpit this morning, and my good friend Jana — a fantastic priest — was going to bring you the Good News while I ministered to her flock. When I heard Mark died, though, it seemed like it was important that we all be together this morning, so Jana and I will do the swap another day.

I had a sermon all written to give at St. John's on the Lake. It wasn't a very good sermon, because the readings seemed to lack any fire. I have a hard time getting excited about an excerpt of a sermon where Jesus is getting very technical about the relationship between his followers and the enormous body of work that the ancient Jewish people called the Law. Imagine rules for every situation possible as well as limitless commentaries and teachings on those same writings. Now imagine Jesus spending a dusty afternoon talking about the books of the Law, and you have absolutely lost me. If you can't find a spark in the readings, it's really hard to preach on them. Still, I wrote something serviceable and forgettable and then threw in a few jokes to get up to my word count.

And then I got a call on Friday night that Mark had died. And his wife, his best friend, and I all prayed over his body, thanking God for the life of an amazing man, and asking God to bring Mark's soul into an everlasting embrace. And in the moment, I experienced the palpable power of God working through the community of St. Mark's.

That experience of God's power in the midst of suffering made me read this morning's Gospel with brand new eyes.

Jesus is preaching about the Law. And he is saying some pretty radical things about how his followers ought to respond to the ancient teachings of Israel. He says that it's not enough not to murder; you must not even name call or deride a neighbor. He says that it's not enough to refrain from inappropriate sexual behavior. You have to stop leering and lusting also. You may not abandon a wife to the tribulations of poverty and death, and you certainly may not say prayers at the altar of God until you have reconciled with your fellow followers of Jesus.

Jesus insists that the shape of the Law is insufficient for forming a real community of love. The kind of community Jesus imagines is one that goes deeper than the shape of the Law, one where

our love for one another and for God elicits in us a kind of care for others that is in itself righteousness. I can't imagine calling you names or looking at you inappropriately precisely because we have been knit together into a body by God. In other words, it's not following the rules that leads you to radical love. It's radical love that leads you to follow the rules.

And one of the heartbreaks of our limited, mortal lives is that we don't always see God's radical love on display until something terrible happens. And I have certainly seen it these last two days. The outpouring of love to the Heffrons reminds me that we don't go and check the rules in a time of need. The rules are so written on our hearts, that we embody them. Because of what God has done for us in this room, we are able to be kind, self-sacrificing, welcoming, and honest. This community isn't just the neighborhood bridge club — it is the body of Christ, and it is concerned with nothing less than life and death. Most days it's life. Some days it's death.

And even in the face of unexpected death, we remain a community of love that reaches far beyond the grave. Death does not have the last word here in this space.

So, by all means, read God's commandments. Tell them to your neighbors, and teach them to your children. But at the end of the day, and really at the end of our lives, the Law written on our bones — Laws observed in this building for 125 years and counting, Laws observed by Christians since the first follower of Jesus threw down his net and started to follow — these deeper Laws will get us through the difficult chapters in life. They will sustain us because they are rooted in Jesus Christ, whose way and teaching is love.

So, good people of God. I know that many of you are mourning a dear friend, and husband, and a brother in Christ this morning. And I know that many of you are reckoning with an empty space at the back of the church where Mark stood. Let your grief be fierce and real and angry and present.

And at the same time, lean on the foundation of the love of God — a sturdy way of life that Jesus points us to today. Don't look just to the words on the page to find out what it is that God is asking of us. Instead, look underneath the words to the actions of this beloved community — even in the midst of the trials this week will bring. See the radical kindness and comfort that will spring from the stones of this church, and know that God is the author of our abundance, even our grief. Amen.