

## When Love Comes To Town

A sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7, Year C),  
for the Commissioning of Young Adult Service Corps members and appointed Missionaries,  
preached at Christ Church, Tarrytown, NY, on June 23, 2013,  
by The Venerable William C. Parnell, Archdeacon for Mission

*When love comes to town,  
I'm gonna jump that train,  
When love comes to town,  
I'm gonna catch that flame.  
Maybe I was wrong to ever let you down,  
But I did what I did before love came to town.*

Those are the words of the great blues artist B. B. King. They came to mind in reading today's lessons which tell us stories of how love heals and restores unity. When Love – that's with a capital "L" – comes to town, the God who is Love overcomes evil and breaks down the barriers that divide people from God, from one another and from their own true selves.

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Can you imagine what it must have been like for that man who lived among the tombs of the Gerasenes? We can only speculate about what led him to be characterized as a demoniac – what illnesses possessed him or what fear possessed his community. What we do know is that he was cast out, about as cast out as a human being can be: stripped of all his resources right down to the clothes on his back, exiled from his home and relegated to the city of the dead, chained there and kept under guard so people wouldn't have their sense of security threatened. But even all those measures could not contain him and he would break free and run wild. When he first lays eyes on Jesus, he figures that there will only be more torment for him, that there could be no healing or reunion.

It was only when Love came to town and put a name on the demons that things started to change. Note, however, that the healing that takes place involves more than just the one person. The demons are perfectly content to remain attached to the man, rather than to be cast into the abyss. We have a deep need, it seems, to put a face on evil – to objectify it, marginalize it, contain it, and send it packing. The word *scapegoat* has its Biblical roots in a ritual for the Day of Atonement and is described in Leviticus as the animal on whose head the sins of all the people were laid symbolically, and then driven into the wilderness to carry them away. So too, this man

relegated to the tombs had become a scapegoat, a symbol of a legion of evils to be driven into the wilds. When Love comes to town there is no need for scapegoats, only for repentance and reconciliation.

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Repentance and reconciliation come at a cost, however. A herd of pigs nearby are spooked by all the commotion and make a mad dash for a cliff. It may be one thing to sacrifice a goat, or even to chain up the town oddball, but when repentance involves a whole herd somebody is taking an economic hit. Suddenly, the local economy is disrupted and the healing of this individual is overshadowed by the price the community has to pay. It is one thing to offer our prayers and platitudes for those who are suffering, and quite another to embrace the change that is needed to bring it to an end. You might think that the Gerasenes would have been delighted to see one of their own restored; in fact, they were not all that ready to bear the cost. When Love comes to town the status quo gets disrupted. It has been said that Jesus came to comfort the afflicted, but also to afflict the comfortable. Some will find relief, others will be challenged.

The temptation, of course, is to stay in our comfort zone. For the one who had been healed that seemed like running away with Jesus. For the townspeople it seemed like getting back to normal as quickly as they could. Notice that neither happens. Jesus sends the man back into the community to proclaim how much God had done for him – and its corollary, how much God had done for the community. I suspect that was not an easy job for any of them. Even when Love shows us a new life-giving way, it takes time for hearts to change. That is the ongoing work of living together as a community formed by Love.

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And that is what we strive to be as the Church – a community formed by Love. We don't have it all down perfectly just yet – we are a work in progress, continually being molded by Jesus who is Love Incarnate. He alone is the one who bears our sins and our brokenness. No scapegoats are needed, only a community of people who have seen Love at work in our own lives and are commissioned to tell all that God has done for us. We who seek to follow in the ways of Jesus are given that work of reconciliation which restores people to wholeness and challenges the powers that prevent it from happening. It will surely comfort some; it will surely afflict others – and the Church is called to reach out to both. That's why Paul talked about a community united in Jesus where all the marks of distinction and sources of division disappear: neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.

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Three weeks ago one of my heroes died. Will Davis Campbell is his name, and like B. B. King, he was born in Mississippi, the son of a farmer and a soldier in World War II. He was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement, a white Baptist preacher who helped found a variety of organizations dedicated to reconciling communities bringing wholeness to those who were cast to the margins because of their skin color. He held the hands of black children who were entering white schools in Little Rock for the first time, but he was just as likely to sit down for a beer with a Ku Klux Klan member who might for the first time talk about his fears. He stood by many who were afflicted with demons of both oppression and bigotry, and by his own brother who suffered until death from the demons of addiction. Campbell strived to bring people together across the barriers that separate us, not spending time with the like-minded, but instead creating communities where hearts were converted because of the experience of someone different, even an enemy. Campbell knew first-hand how broken we all are and the damage we can do to one another because of it – and he also knew the power of Love to heal and reconcile. To take another few lines from B. B. King:

*I was there when they crucified my lord  
I held the scabbard when the soldier drew his sword  
I threw the dice when they pierced his side,  
But I've seen love conquer the great divide.*

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Today we have among us about twenty-five people who are being sent to some far-flung corners of the world to serve in the name of Jesus who is Love Incarnate. Love is about to come to town in some new ways through their presence. I give thanks for their energy and commitment, their vision and their willingness to risk crossing oceans and borders and barriers to share the Good News. But most of us are staying put, and there is no less need for us to be in mission right here. There is plenty of need for Jesus to tarry a while in Tarrytown, and Love has come to town in the people who are Christ Church, a community that is being formed by Love in new ways all the time. Whether you're staying or going, jump that train and catch that flame. Carry Love to town by telling the stories of what God has done for you. Listen well to the stories of what God is doing for those among whom you live. Let Love form a community. I bet you will see Love conquer a great divide.

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