

Love at the Corner of Bourbon and St. Peter
Luke 24: 1-12, Acts 10:34-43
Easter Sunday, April 8, 2007

The smell of sour beer and sweet whiskey still hung in the air, even after the street-washing trucks had made their early morning rounds. A few drunks still slept on benches and in shadowy corners of the street. The filtered sun on a beautiful, but already warm summer morning pierced through the oak trees and furthered warmed me as I walked down this familiar street. The raucous, raunchy sounds of jazz and laughter were now gone. There was an eerie silence in the air, almost as if last night's noises were gone forever, never to again return. Then it happened. It started softly in that beautiful baritone voice. Like Gabriel's trumpet it attracted, even commanded every ear within hearing distance. From the slight frame of a young, handsome, African-American a familiar song in a surprising location began to sound. Every head turned to that solitary man at that street corner. Slow walks became completely still for just a few minutes as that song pierced the thick, damp, morning air. I have always felt that *Amazing Grace* was most beautiful when sung without musical accompaniment. I was now convinced of it. His voice matched perfectly his confident posture and joyous expression. It was as if time stood still for those six timeless verses. I wished for a seventh, an eighth and a ninth. I wanted the verse to come true in that instant that there were no less days to sing God's praise than when he'd first begun. But then it ended just as abruptly as it had begun. As I stood across the street from this singing angel I noticed that he had no moneybox in front of him like all the other musicians in the Crescent City. This experience, just like the experience of God's love, was completely free. I looked around quickly, as the song abruptly ended, wanting to capture in the lens of my mind's eye

every detail of this scene that I knew at that moment that I would never forget. The sights, the smells, the tastes, but mostly the sound of *Amazing Grace* sung in this city of New Orleans, so in need of God's gracious favor. I wanted also to know the precise location of this experience. I looked up at the street corner so that I could know for sure that I had experienced love at the corner of Bourbon and St. Peter.

Although God's love is all around us in every moment of every day, I experience God's love not at its best at termination points. I experience God's love best at intersections where I least expect to find it. Have you found that to be the same for you as well? Yes, I have had the dead-end experiences where God has seemed to pull me through, but the sweetest experience of God has been at intersections of the streets in my life, sometimes at the intersections of roads that I didn't even know crossed. **I want to suggest as we remember the Easter story today that we see the Living One, the Christ, at those surprise intersections of our lives where the circle of love expands.**

Easter begins in the gospel of Luke at the scene of Jesus' tomb. The women, Jesus' disciples, had approached a termination point – the grave of their Lord. They are surprised to find that Jesus is not there but are greeted by an angel, in dazzling white, who poses an outrageous question to them: “Why do you seek the Living One among the dead?” Why do you think you will encounter Jesus at this dead end? He's alive and already moving down the road toward another intersection. The women return to tell the other disciples of their encounter and none of them believe it, none remember the thing that Jesus told them over and over again. Only Peter is at least skeptical enough to check it out for himself, seeing only the burial linens, and he leaves the tomb scratching his head. This story was written down in Luke's account about forty years after it happened.

It had been told by word of mouth over and over again. Now it was known by heart by a community of faith who were communicating the good news to a new generation who would come to know this Jesus as the Christ. Just like Peter, each of us has to grapple with this story, scratching our heads to accept it in some form as an act of faith.

But Luke has another powerful story to tell about intersections. In some ways it comes to us in an even stranger and more powerful cloth this morning. Long after Peter has stopped scratching his head, after he has been appointed as a leader of the Apostles, he comes to an intersection, where he takes a turn that will lead the church of Jesus Christ toward explosive growth into the gentile world populated by you and me. The good news of Jesus Christ was to go beyond the tiny nation of Israel. And the beginning of that movement started in the story told by Luke at the intersection of Cornelius and St. Peter. Love happened at the intersection of Cornelius and St. Peter. We get the powerful statement of Peter in chapter 10 of the book of the Acts of the Apostles that “God shows no preference of one person over another.” In other words, God is a completely inclusive God. Open hearts, open minds, open doors, no exceptions! Amen. So how did Peter get convinced of that fact and stop scratching his head? Luke weaves a wonderful story of a divinely designed intersection. Cornelius is Roman centurion and a “God-fearer.” Cornelius was not born a Jew. But he loves God, studies his Torah, and is richly generous to the poor. However, since he has not been circumcised into the Hebrew faith, he is considered a second-class religious citizen. He can worship at the temple, but has to stay at a distance from the inner court. He can never be an ordained priest of the temple. Depending on what time of religious leadership he lived, his marital union with a non-

Jew would be not only discouraged, but divorce might even be encouraged. Full inclusion was not an option for Cornelius. Does this sound familiar to anyone?

But then along comes God. God says to Cornelius, “Send representatives to the coastal city of Joppa to meet with a man named Peter who is staying with a tanner named Simon. You are to have them bring Peter to you for a message he will share with you.” At just about that time, Peter is on the flat roof at the house in Joppa where Peter is staying and he has a vision. A sheet descends from heaven and all kinds of tasty animals are on that sheet. God says, “Make your sacrifice and eat!” Now Peter is really hungry, but he sees several animals that are “unclean” by God’s dietary law and he replies, “God, I have never had pass my lips several of these animals that are unclean and profane.” God says, “Don’t call profane what I have pronounced clean!” Does this remind you of anyone? Peter gets it! Within a few moments of that vision the representatives of Cornelius arrive at his door. He welcomes in these unclean Gentiles and shares a meal with them! How reconciling is that? So they bring back Peter on the two-day trip to Caesarea. As Peter comes to Cornelius’ house, Cornelius drops to his knees to worship Peter. Peter says, “Get up, Cornelius, I am a human being just like you.” Cornelius asks Peter to share with him what God has put on his lips. Peter shares the good news of the Easter story – the redeeming life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and that this is good news for ALL people – no exceptions. Cornelius and his household receive the message with joy and begin miraculously speaking in tongues. Peter, convinced of their righteousness and that the Holy Spirit has visited on them, orders them to be baptized. Righteousness and reconciliation have come at the intersection of Cornelius and St. Peter.

No more unlikely intersection could have occurred than Gerry Pelletier and Julius Campbell. Gerry was white. Julius was black. They each starred on rival high school football teams in the segregated city of Arlington, Virginia. Then God showed up or at least the Virginia legislature. The schools and football teams were integrated. The white football coach of the merged school was replaced by an African-American coach. Thus began the greatest season that the Titans ever experienced. In the movie, *Remember the Titans*, the reconciliation of white and black in this southern town was led and epitomized by Gerry and Julius. They started as archenemies. They were forced to room together at a team retreat. They fought physically. They hurled insults at each other. But united by a common goal to bring excellence and a state championship to their high school they became the best of friends. It was not a friendship without costs. Gerry's girlfriend, filled with prejudice and fear, broke up with Gerry over his choice of his new friend. Gerry's mother was shocked and embarrassed by her son's newfound friendship. But hearts were changed. Tragedy struck on the eve of the state championship, however. Gerry was critically wounded in a car collision. Laying paralyzed from the waist down in his hospital room, his friend Julius came calling. As he poked his head in the room the white nurse looked scornfully at Julius. She said, "Son, only kin's allowed in here." Gerry sits up in his bed and replies, "Alice, are you blind? Don't you see the family resemblance? That's my brother."

There is a universal brotherhood and sisterhood that God points to in the intersections that we find in Scripture. God says, "Don't call unclean, don't call profane what I have made clean in my Creation!" God says, "if you don't think I am serious or if you can't somehow get that I will send a model of that theology in your midst. His name

is Jesus and he was so serious about bringing reconciliation and healing into the world that he lost himself in his mission, became so focused on my Kingdom, that he forgot about himself, and risked everything. The people didn't like the change he brought. It scared them, so they killed him. But they couldn't keep him down. I raised him so that you would never forget him or what he taught." And we celebrate that intersection of that life, death and resurrection on this day. The scriptures are filled with unlikely intersections that teach us startling messages: the Good Samaritan and the Hebrew man that he should have hated but instead saved. Jesus and the woman at the well who Jesus brought hope, healing and dignity to whom the world had suffocated in prejudice and shame.

Intersections...what future, imagined intersection do I see at the corner of Mulberry and Harold? I see sisters and brothers of all sexual orientations and gender identities worshipping and praising God together. On a hot, sticky, Houston summer I see people fully healed of AIDS. I see full inclusion of all people, even in the United Methodist Church. I see couples of all orientations coming to God's altar to give themselves to each other in holy unions. I see lesbian, gay and straight clergy standing in this Sanctuary blessing those unions, proclaiming the Word of God and celebrating the Eucharist as representative ministers of the gospel. For when God lowers that sheet, just like God showed Peter, God puts everyone of us on that sheet...every color, every gender and orientation. God says boldly, "Do not profane in any way what I have made clean, white and dazzling in my presence!" Like that sheet, suspended in the air for all to see, we will sing and experience in this place amazing grace. On that day there will be no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun.