

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

Narrative Lectionary 4.45 – 1 John 03/04 & 04/04  
I John 4.1-21

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Salem, Bridgeport

“Love Is the Point”

Yesterday at our social media workshop, James Admans, our social media consultant, shared one of his posts:

“Church is the practice; love is the point” – which pretty much sums up our lesson for the day: it’s all about love. The sad thing is that the church is not always a loving place and we are not always loving people.

When we were at the ELCA Youth Gathering in Houston we heard some powerful speakers. I’d like to briefly share three of their stories with you.

When Pastor Will Starkweather<sup>i</sup> was in high school, it certainly appeared that he had his life all together. He was an A and B student, was active in sports, in theater, in choir, and in church, and he had lots of friends. His life looked perfect from the outside,

but on the inside there was a pain deep in his heart and in his head that he did not know how to heal. He couldn’t control the fear, the stress, the anger, and the sadness that overwhelmed him, so he began doing something he could control: he began the self-harming practice of cutting. It worked. The physical pain of cutting distracted him from his emotional pain.

But it was only a temporary solution; like most addictions, he became dependent on it. It wasn’t until he was a sophomore in college that he sought help.

He had been raised in the church, was a religion major, wanted to be a pastor, and was working in a church, so he decided to share with his pastor the hurt and shame of his addiction.

His pastor responded with four words: “You’re going to hell”.

Those words confirmed all his worst fears: he was completely broken and there was no hope that he could ever be fixed. He left the church, dropped out of school, moved back home, sank into a deep depression...and cut.

Over the next 2 years he tried to get his life back. He went back to school and found a new church.

He started playing in their praise band, but he was afraid to join the church because he was terrified he’d not be accepted. Finally he went to Pastor Carla and shared his story with her and she, too, responded with four words:

“There’s grace for that”. Those words changed his life.

Recovery wasn’t overnight; recovery is a process.

But he began sharing his story with others, he did research, he found out how common a problem cutting is, and that motivated him to share even more.

On Easter he celebrated 10 years safe from self-harm, and yet he makes it clear that he is no hero.

He is just as broken as he ever was, but he knows now: “There’s grace for that”.

Nadia Bolz-Weber<sup>ii</sup> was raised in a conservative, fundamentalist church.

Even though the church was the only place outside her own home where people didn’t gawk at her or make fun of her, there were just too many reasons she didn’t fit in even there.

“Being Christian mostly meant being really good at NOT doing things.

Not drinking, obviously, not being snarky and sarcastic, not having sex outside of marriage, not smoking, not dancing, not swearing, not dating people outside the church, and...no mixed bathing<sup>iii</sup> (i.e., no boys and girls in the same swimming pool).

The church had taught her that everyone was to be sorted into containers: “acceptable/good” or “not acceptable/bad”.

If you did any of those things on the bad list, you belonged in the “not acceptable to God” container.

By the time she was 19, she had “purple hair, a drinking problem, an attitude problem, and a smoking-pot-every-day problem<sup>iv</sup>” and it was obvious she was not welcome in the church.

And yet, Nadia missed the community of the church which no longer welcomed her and spent years trying to re-create that community with those like her who lived broken lives on the margins of society.

It wasn’t until she met a cute Lutheran seminary student that she discovered there are Christians who actually believe in more than NOT doing bad things – but in actually doing good things – like working for social justice.

It wasn’t until she found herself in a Lutheran congregation that she learned that church is not about saying and doing the right things in order to get to heaven, but it’s about God meeting us with grace every time we don’t say or do the right thing.

In 8th grade, Maria Rose Belding<sup>v</sup> drafted a business plan for creating an online database, matching food banks and food pantries with retailers of food to reduce food waste in this country. Now a 22 year old premed student, the founder and CEO of MEANS database, one of Glamour magazine's women of the year, with commendation letters from Barack Obama, she talked to us about God's love and grace.

In high school she was active in youth groups, played on varsity sports teams, and gave speeches to national audiences, while at the same time she was on 10 different prescription medications, had 9 different doctors, and 8 different diagnoses, including major depressive disorder.

She was also pretty sure she was bisexual, but was afraid to tell anyone, because she was afraid that people in her incredibly homophobic community would hate her – maybe even hit her.

She was confused and couldn't keep her confusion inside anymore, so, in tears, she told her pastor that she was pretty sure she was queer.

He responded that she was too pretty to be anything but straight, and since she had never kissed anyone of either gender, she couldn't know for sure.

So in order to prove to her that she was straight, he raped her.

When she came forward to talk about what had happened to her, the people in her community took his side, telling her that it was her fault, and that he had done the right thing to try to straighten her out.

She was made to feel used and dirty and irredeemable, and it was only through God's Word in II Corinthians 12:9,

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made greatest in weakness” that she began to understand that no matter how spectacularly broken she was, she was still God's beloved child.

The stories we heard were powerful – in both their tragedy and their joy.

When people spoke of how they had been hurt and broken by the church, you could have heard a pin drop.

Our hearts broke just hearing about the pain inflicted by pastors and lay people and self-righteous, arrogant and judgmental theological beliefs and positions.

But despite their pain, these speakers were blessed, because somehow God's grace had found them, and they had found churches that accepted them and welcomed them and loved them just as they were – in all their brokenness.

The thing is, each of us, as an individual, is at the same time 100% sinner and 100% saint.

And that means that as church communities, we are also communities of saints and sinners.

As communities of sinners, that means that we will inevitably hurt one another.

Eventually we will be judgmental or arrogant or self-righteous or thoughtless or self-centered.

We will betray each other, offend each other, or let each other down.

We will experience the brokenness of sin and death and the power of evil.

But the good news is that when we open our hearts to God's love,

God transforms us from broken sinners into beautiful saints.

And when that happens, then grace flows and love abounds,

and we can accept and welcome and love every child of God, just as they are – sinner and saint, broken and beautiful, unlovable and beloved.

*“<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another”*, writes John. *“<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another”*.

I'll say it one more time: *“<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another”*. For after all, love is the point. **Amen**

<sup>i</sup> <https://youtu.be/qHWMcbGXY0o>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://youtu.be/kM9Y5S3UYi8>

<sup>iii</sup> *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* by Nadia Bolz-Weber, Jericho Books, NY/Boston/Nashville, © 2013, p. 23.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>v</sup> <https://youtu.be/2JxGDQkbfoU>