

Covered with Love

The olive-backed thrush and her mate had built their nest in what seemed to be a safe place. Atop a beam under the eaves of the back patio of an unoccupied house in Flat Rock, North Carolina. In the nest, she laid her eggs. And as the spring days grew warmer, trees leafed out. Flowering plants budded and blossomed. New life was everywhere. All was well with the thrush and her eggs.

Until one day, her world changed. Two giant humans showed up at her house, along with some dogs. When the huge creatures walked right underneath her nest, she swooped down fearlessly, trying to scare them away. The giants went back inside the house, but came out again periodically. With the dogs.

Then, after a few days, just as the hatchlings were emerging from their shells, the weather turned. Driving rain fell in sheets, and a wind began to blow its cold breath on the nest. While mama thrush was out getting food for her babies, two of them fell out of the nest onto the patio below. They did not survive. And the larger

human gently picked them up and buried them in the woods behind the house.

That night the temperature dropped again and the wind blustered. Great frigid gusts beat on the nest and on mama thrush, threatening to sweep her off of it and dash her violently against the side of the house. But she stayed on the nest, protecting and sheltering her little ones, keeping them warm beneath her wings. And in the morning, when the sun came up and the humans looked out the window, there she still sat. Even when the humans came out with the dogs and walked near the nest, mama thrush remained on it. Maybe she'd realized they weren't going to harm her babies. But in any case, she continued to shield them under her feathers. She continued to cover them with her wings.

On this Sunday, the thrush's story makes us think of the One who created her. This is the One who shelters and protects. This is the One who covers you and me with love. In the gospels, we get to see a portrait of this One who is revealed in Jesus. In today's reading from the Fourth Gospel, Jesus speaks of his great love for his followers—those of long ago and you of the here and now.

This morning I invite you to begin learning—or to keep on learning—to see yourself as one who is *covered* with the love of

Jesus Christ. It can be a steep learning curve, particularly for those of us who have been persuaded—by others or by ourselves—that we are not lovable creatures.

Maybe that's why—although it's not difficult to comprehend in my mind, in an abstract sort of way, that Jesus loves me—it's not as easy to believe, to really believe, down in my innermost places, that a sinner like me could be covered with the love of Christ.

So how do I know? How do *you* know that Jesus covers you with love? Let's spend a few moments considering that question.

You know that Jesus covers you with his love because he yearns to offer you a refuge. He shares this yearning with you: *How often have I desired to gather [you] together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.* What a beautiful image of Jesus! Who covers you with his love.

You know this to be true because he calls you friends. He no longer calls you servants. There are exceptions, of course, but one doesn't usually have a loving relationship with a servant. Now this doesn't mean that you and I won't continue to serve him. What it *does* mean is that, as faithful disciples, you have a new status.

Jesus calls you friends.

And for Jesus, that word *friend* connotes more than just a casual familiarity. For Jesus, *friend* means *one who is loved*. A friend is someone you love. Someone, maybe, that you have *come* to love. Sometimes—for us—that’s a process. Sometimes—for us—that’s a struggle.

Bob and I like to watch vintage movies, and a favorite one is titled “The Four Seasons.” It stars Alan Alda and Carol Burnett. And it’s about friendship. It’s a reflection on the seasons of friendship. At first, the friendship is new and fun. As time passes, the bond grows stronger and deeper. But eventually, friends can get to a place where one another’s idiosyncrasies and quirks and foibles and flaws begin to irritate and aggravate, and the friendship is tested. In friendship’s final season, events cause friends to contemplate what life might be like without each other. And they accept one another for who they are. In the end, accept them and love them.

But there is One who has loved you from the very start. A friend is someone who knows all about you and loves you anyway. Jesus has loved you, no matter what kind of friend you’ve been in return. Even if there was a time when you were not a friend to him, he has been *your* friend. He loves you as a friend.

A friend is different from a family member. You're born into a particular family. If you marry, your spouse's family automatically become *your* relatives. You don't get to choose. But it's different with a friend. A friend is someone you have *chosen*. Chosen to spend time with. Chosen to care about.

Christ has chosen you and me.

Oh, I used to think that beginning to grow in faith was my own idea. But the truth is that it wasn't. And it wasn't your idea, either. Faith is a gift from the Giver. From the One who always makes the first move. The initiative, the invitation, the grace always comes from God in Christ Jesus.

You are Jesus' beloved friends. A friend is someone chosen to confide in. Someone to trust with your secrets.

Remember when you were a kid? When you couldn't wait to hang out with your best friend? So you could giggle and share secrets?

Jesus longs for intimate time with you. And he has trusted you with his secrets. Has shared with you the secrets of his kingdom. Has made them known to you. Has invited you into the closeness of his loving relationship with his Father.

When you love someone, don't you want to be close to that person? Don't you want your beloved to be more like you?

You know that Jesus covers you with his love because what he desires is that you be more like him: that you love as he loves. We know that loving is key, because it's the *only* command Jesus gives his first-century and his twenty-first century disciples.

Think about all of Jesus' words that have come down to us in the gospels. There are blessings, prayers and parables, sayings and stories and sermons. But Jesus gives just one new commandment: *love one another as I have loved you*. He says, *you are my friends if you do what I command you*. When you have a friend, you hope that person will do what you want him or her to do. Jesus' friends are those who live into his perfect will.

Just as Jesus has covered you with his love, his will for you is to take that love you have received and cover others with it. His will for you is that you be to others a shelter, a refuge from the blustering storms of a cold world. His will for you is that you share his love in this world.

That's what Jesus means when he teaches about fruit-bearing, as we heard him do in last Sunday's reading, and hear again today.

He has appointed you to go and bear fruit: the fruit of loving acts. The fruit of loving others.

As Søren Kierkegaard puts it, “to love another person is to help that person to love God, and to be loved is to be helped in loving God.” When you bear fruit, you bring others into loving relationship with God in Christ Jesus.

Who has covered you with his love. Each one of you! You are his friend. In your heart of hearts, you know the reality of his love because he has laid down his life for you. You are one of those for whom Jesus has laid down his life. You are one of those for whom he has gone to Golgotha. You are one of those for whom he has offered himself. You are one of those *to* whom he offers himself now, in *this* place: his broken body, his poured-out blood.

His cross, now empty, stands as your witness. There is no greater love than this love Christ has for you, his friend. The deep, deep love with which he covers you still; today, tomorrow, and forever.

Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.