

Sermon7

November 1 (All Saints Day)

Ruth 1:1-18, Psalm 146, Hebrews 9:11-14, Mark 12:28-34

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## Catholics of the Cosmos

### (Part 2; The Job)

Opening prayer: Sweet Lord, whatever these feeble words may be, may these week words be of service to Thee, Amen.

Last time I was in the pulpit I said that my meditation had a title of which I was unjustly proud, and to make matters worse, I like it so well I have decided to use it again. So, welcome to Catholics of the Cosmos, Part 2. We may, in retrospect, call Part 1 “The Vision”, and I’ll now call Part 2, “The Job.”

For those who did not know that there would be a test, I will briefly summarize Part 1, to give us a little context.

The word “Catholic” is not confined to a particular church configuration, and it goes even beyond the idea of the sum of all Christian Churches. The definition of “Catholic” that excites me means “all encompassing, or all embracing”. Our faith, while it is local, and personal, also reaches out into the long and troubled story of human existence, and, indeed, embraces the entire universe, both its history, and its future.

I tried to give us a feeling for the cosmic dimension of our faith with some samples of the Apostle Paul’s writings, also through the work a modern theologian, and with a brief visit to John’s Gospel. We finished with father Abraham out under the starry desert sky believing God’s great promise that through him would come a great nation through which all the nations of the world would be blessed, and, in believing that promise, becoming one of the first and greatest Catholics of the Cosmos.

Now What? Part 2 is all about the “now what?” We noted that even with the great promise and the great vision, Abraham still had many miles of desert to cross. He had the vision, now the rest of his life was all about the job.

Our faith says that each and every one of us is, in some sense, a child of Abraham. We are, each one, a cosmic star, part of the promised blessing to the human race. But Abraham’s job is not finished, he needs our help. We are part of the promise, as well as part of the blessing. Every single Catholic of the Cosmos has a job.

Well, what's the job? You may ask. And I'm so glad you did. This is exactly the question that was burning in the mind of the religious scholar in Jesus' day. Let me re-read our morning Gospel lesson as it is paraphrased in *The Message*:

*One of the religion scholars came up. Hearing the lively exchanges of question and answer and seeing how sharp Jesus was in his answers, he put in his question: "Which is most important of all the commandments?"*

*Jesus said, "The first in importance is 'Listen Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.' And here is the second: 'Love others as you love yourself.' There is no other commandment that ranks with these."*

*The religion scholar said, "A wonderful answer, Teacher! So lucid and accurate—that God is one and there is no other. And loving him with all passion and intelligence and energy, and loving others as well as you love yourself. Why, that's better than all offerings and sacrifices put together!"*

*When Jesus realized how insightful he was, he said, "You're almost there, right on the border of God's kingdom."*

*After that, no one dared ask a question.*

The scribe, like you and I, was a child of Abraham, and the question foremost on his mind was how to fulfill the promise. and Jesus answer was profound in its simplicity. You fulfill the promise of Abraham by keeping the great commandment, and the great commandment is love.

Jesus' encounters with the religious elite of his day ranged from contentious to hostile, but here he goes so far as to give one of the religious elite an "attaboy". He says, in effect, "You are just one step away from the Kingdom."

So the law, and the prophets, and the promises are summed up in a single word. It is so simple, is it any wonder that we still don't get it? We are often more comfortable with complications.

Love is that big, fat, lumpy, mess of a word that means so much it can become meaningless. We can miss the forest for the trees. I cringe when I hear my television tell me that "love is what makes a Subaru, a Subaru." Those advertisers ought to be ashamed. Surely this most abused of words does not need to be desecrated any further.

I was discussing this with my a friend a while back. I was lamenting that we had just this one word to try and cover so much, whereas the Greeks had three or four words to cover the various aspects of love. But my friend disagreed. She said it's better to have one term to act as a kind of umbrella under which to gather all of the various messy meanings. After thinking about it awhile, I thought "She could be right". Though subject to abuse, there is something to be said

for having a single term that includes everything from sex and ice-cream to our mystical/spiritual union with God, the Maker of heaven and earth.

The Job is the Great Commandment, the job is love, and isn't wonderful that, for us, the Catholics of the Cosmos, the unemployment rate is zero. There is, in fact, a perpetual labor shortage. The harvest seems always to be plentiful, and the laborers seem always to be few. I know we do many good things here at Grace church, and it isn't my intention to make anyone's burden heavier. It's important to realize that the Great Commandment is not, and was never intended to be a burden. Our Bible, in fact, calls it the Law of Liberty. And it is not a test. If it were a test, every one of us would flunk. The Great Commandment, to love God with our total being, and to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves, is not a burden and not a test, it is a job description.

And we have the greatest boss, ever. The job is individually tailored to each our abilities and interests. There are aspects of the job that only you can do, and your boss will give you the training and the equipment that are normally in concert with abilities that you already have . But don't worry if you haven't had a lot of training or aren't sure about your qualifications. The primary requirement is to show up; in our work-boots and hard hats, and with our lunch pails, and be ready to work.

Love, though, is not a noun, it's a verb. Love is not a feeling, it is a practice. Love, in fact, is sometimes what you do after all the good feelings have left. Anyone who has been awakened from a sound sleep at 3 AM to change a dirty diaper knows what I'm talking about. (Not to mention all the love that went into giving birth to that little dirty diaper making machine in the first place.)

It is beyond my intention, and way beyond my abilities, to give a comprehensive definition of this most beautiful, and most abused of words. But it has one characteristic that I'd like to bring to our attention. Love, in whatever form it may take, is a little bit crazy. Love is always a little bit unreasonable. Let me give you a few examples:

Not too many years ago, on a back-packing trip in Yosemite. I was heading home after four or five days when I saw two little brown blobs run across the trail at full speed and climb up a tree. I thought at first they were weasels or rats, but then I saw mamma bear running after them and I knew I was in some kind of trouble. Mamma didn't climb the tree. She skidded to a stop and gave me "the look", the mamma bear look. I may not be the brightest bulb in the chandelier, but I knew in a heart-beat (which was beating pretty fast at that moment) that it was time to give mamma lots of room. She was ready to go to the mat for a couple of slimy balls of fur. So we compromised. She got to keep the trail, and I got to keep my life. Pretty good deal, I thought.

That's a primitive display of love, and you might think that as love gets more civilized, it gets more reasonable, but you would be wrong. The more elevated the love, the crazier it gets.

In our Old Testament reading we have one of the Bible's great love-stories. The book of Ruth was, perhaps, my mother's favorite book in the scriptures. But we revere this story after three thousand years of its telling because Ruth's love for Naomi, unlike that of the other daughter-in-law, was a little over the top. Had everyone been reasonable, we wouldn't even have the book of Ruth.

But I want to kick it on up to the cosmic level. (We are all, Catholics of the Cosmos, and should study these things.) I really like listening to Astro-physicists because they just can't help sounding like theologians at times. I was watching the science channel a few weeks back and the program was about what they think happened just a few trillionths of a second after the Big Bang (that moment some 13 plus billion years ago when the universe, they say, came into being). It seems there was a great cosmic war between matter and anti-matter. (The first Game of Thrones, I suppose.) Well, matter defeated anti-matter by one point on a Hail-Mary full court shot that hit the net right at the buzzer. And that's the reason we have a universe instead of nothing. It's kinda crazy. The Astro-physicist who was trying to explain it all got so excited and animated I thought she was going to jump out of her skin. She said, "It just doesn't make any sense. We shouldn't even exist!" (exclamation point).

You know how during a football game you'll get up and talk to the television set. Well, I didn't actually do it, but I thought about getting up and saying "Amen! Preach it sister! Like the scribe in Jesus' day, you are just one step away from the kingdom of God!"

Grace is one of the best synonyms we have for that love that stretches and sometimes breaks the boundaries of reason. Grace is more than the name of a church (although there is no better name for a church) and grace is even more than a theological idea. Theologians say that grace is God's unmerited favor. But everything that is, is God's unmerited favor, from the most distant galaxy to the beat of your heart, and even those little dirty diaper making machines. You have heard, perhaps, of original sin, but our very existence is God's original grace. It doesn't necessarily make any sense, but there it is, and here we are, each and every one, a product of grace. And being both a product and a sign of this crazy grace is our job as children of Abraham, and as Catholics of the Cosmos.

You might be uncomfortable with all this crazy talk and I sympathize. I like things to make sense and fit into their proper boxes, but reality has a way of eluding our most carefully prepared formulations.

Today Michael C. Curry was officially installed as the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Churches of America. He has a reputation as an outstanding preacher. And as preachers tend to do, he recently published a book of his best sermons. I have read several of them and they are wonderful. The title of his book is, *Crazy Christians, A Call to Follow Jesus*. There is something a little crazy about committing our lives to following this obscure carpenter's son

from the backside of now where as if he were the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, but that, if I may say it one more time, is the job.

There is a lot more to say about this job. We haven't yet discussed the pay, or leaves of absence, or the retirement benefits. There is probably enough here for a Part 3 someday. But for now let me draw to a close by congratulating us all on surviving another Halloween, and along those lines, observing that my sermons are beginning to scare me a little bit. And the more I preach them the more scared I get. If I may again bring Bishop Curry into the conversation, in a sermon he delivered on The Great Commission (which is another more fancy way of saying "the job") he said, "it excites me, it motivates me, and it scares me."

I feel the same way, because... what if this stuff is true? If it's not true, if it's just wishful thinking or stories we tell ourselves to keep away the darkness, then we can all stretch out on the couch and go back to sleep. If the universe is not God's original act of grace, if love is nothing more than a chemical cocktail that we drink once in a while and go temporarily insane, if we are nothing more than a handful of dust, or a puff of smoke, then we come from nothing, we are going nowhere, and in between not much is really happening, nothing of any real importance anyway. So we can all just kick-back and take another nap.

Oh Grace Church. Oh my fellow Catholic Cosmonauts, some of you may say, "We are in the wrong place, we're in the wrong neighborhood. We are the wrong demographic. We are mostly middle class white people, and the people around us are mostly brown and mostly poor. We are surrounded by the energy and messiness of youth, and...some of us at least, are not as young as we used to be." Add to this our financial challenges and the language barrier and some of you may be tempted to say, "Oh me, oh my, how are we ever going to survive?"

But some of you, and I hope the majority of you will feel challenged to say, "Oh boy! God's got us right where she wants us! Maybe it's time to get a little bit crazy and get on with the job."

Please allow me to finish with a prayer:

For the glory of God the Father, the Father of all love, and in the name of God the Son, the Son of all love, and in the power of God the Holy Spirit, who is Everlasting, Ever present, Indivisible, and All Merciful Love, may we this day be granted the vision to recognize Love when she rises up to greet us. And may we, this day, be granted the wisdom, courage and strength to do what Love requires.

And may we, this day, see Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, and follow Thee more  
nearly.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,

Amen.

