



**“All Things: A Meditation on Love”**  
**Scripture – Corinthians 13:1-13**  
**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**  
**Sunday, February 3, 2019**

*I can't wait 'til my son gets older so that I can go back and show him there are still good people in this world – that there are people who will look out for a complete stranger to make sure they're OK.*<sup>1</sup>

Nathan Dyer’s voice was filled with emotion as he marveled at the generosity his family had received after an interview he gave aired on National Public Radio. Nathan is a prison worker in Oakdale, Louisiana. And, like so many others throughout the country, he was struggling to make ends meet last month as the Government Shutdown dragged on. When Nathan first spoke with NPR, he had lost one pay check and was dreading another pay day with nothing to bring home to his family. Compounding his despair — the day he would go without his second paycheck happened to be his son’s second birthday.

Through tears, Nathan told NPR: *I know years down the road my son will never remember this. He's only two; he won't remember it. But my wife and I don't know how we can manage to buy him anything.*<sup>2</sup>

The stress, frustration, and hopelessness that weighed on Nathan as the Shutdown reached its thirty-fourth day poured out in his words. And listeners throughout the country were moved to compassion – listeners like Barbara Scott, who called into NPR and said: “My heart just went out to this gentleman, and I would like to send a check to him. It will be small. I’m old and retired.” But it was something ... an act of kindness to assure Nathan that people cared about him and his family. And Barbara Scott was not alone. Overnight, over one hundred people reached out to National Public Radio to offer gas cards, money, gifts to help Nathan’s family in the midst of this crisis.

Nathan was overwhelmed by the good will and generosity of complete strangers. *I can't wait 'til my son gets older so that I can go back and show him there are still good people in this world*, he said. *[I can't wait 'til he's older so I can show him] there are people who will look out for a complete stranger to make sure they're OK.*

Love bears all things. Love bears the stress of discordant voices and the strain of divisive politics that undermine the foundations of our common life. Love sustains us through trials that test every compassionate impulse and tempt us to turn inward. Love is strong enough to bind us together, even in an era awash in anxiety and animosity,

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrase of Nathan Dyer’s comment during an interview with Ari Shapiro from: “A Reminder Of How Good People Can Be To One Another During The Shutdown,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, January 25, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, also paraphrase.

and powerful enough to prompt complete strangers to declare, “We belong to one another; we must take care of one another.” Yes, love bears all things.

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Another story — this one from the time I spent as a pastor in Southwest Philadelphia. Marcus\* is a boy I came to know during my ministry at The Common Place. He’s a child who has left a lasting imprint on my heart, because — for me — he’s become the face of every issue I hear about on the news: underfunded schools, drug ravaged communities, food scarcity, gun violence, poverty of opportunity. At only ten years old, it seemed Marcus’ life had already been permanently shaped by these issues.

The first time I met Marcus was during a Martin Luther King Day of Service, as dozens of volunteers prepared The Common Place to open its doors. Marcus swept into the building with the energy of a cartoonish Tasmanian Devil. He whirled over to an abandoned paint roller and began slapping white paint on the wall. Then — before anyone could intervene — he spun into the next room, grabbed a sponge, and started to fling soapy water across the floor. By the time an adult caught up with Marcus, he had left a trail of destruction in his wake. You see, Marcus had grown accustomed to spending holidays and weekends entertaining himself, and it usually got him into trouble ... at least when grown-ups paused long enough to pay attention.

When The Common Place did begin operations a few months later, Marcus was back. He would show up whenever he noticed the bright blue doors standing open ... I think because he knew there was food involved. And, sadly, Marcus needed any food he could get. So, when we launched an after school program at The Common Place, we made sure his name was on the roster.

When tutors helped him with his reading, Marcus would get frustrated; it was so hard for him to make sense of simple sentences that he quickly lost patience. He’d sit still for just a few minutes, then run off to the kitchen to see if he could sneak something from the fridge. On Sundays, when Marcus would come an hour early for worship, he’d often storm out of the building because he didn’t want to follow the rules we set for him.

It would have been so easy to view Marcus as a lost cause. A hopeless case. One more casualty of neglected neighborhoods ... But no one did. One of the tutors at the After School Program — a man named Bob,\* who taught the kids photography — took Marcus under his wing. He would help Marcus with his math problems and, then — after the addition was done — would hand over the camera and watch in awe as Marcus discovered beauty in this world. And John \* — one of the regulars at Sunday evening worship — would invite Marcus to sit with him during the service. And, when the time came, John would hand him a basket, and walk with him up and down the aisles as Marcus collected the offering. And every time these grown-ups shepherded him, and encouraged him, and trusted him, Marcus would stand a little taller. And a smile would transform his face.

Love believes all things. Love believes that no one is expendable — that every child is *God’s* child and deserves to be treated as such. Love trusts that everyday acts of kindness can transform lives, and accepts the challenge that comes along with caring. Love regards others as worthy, deserving of justice, desiring dignity. Yes, love believes all things.

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I have one more story for you: This past summer our denomination’s General Assembly met in St. Louis, Missouri; commissioners from every Presbytery within the Presbyterian Church (USA) came together to discern questions facing our church, and — with the Spirit’s guidance — to take steps toward being a more faithful witness to Christ’s love in the world.

Every time the General Assembly gathers, the church’s leadership chooses a mission partner or a cause to receive the offering from Opening Worship. And with the work people of faith have been doing to address racial injustice in St. Louis, the hosting Presbytery encouraged them to use the money collected to sponsor a “bail out.” Yes — you heard me ... I said a “bail out.” This group of Presbyterians — God’s “Frozen Chosen” — decided to use the offering from Opening Worship to bail people out of jail.

I realize the idea of a “bail out” might sound strange — irresponsible, even. Why would a bunch of church folk give money to support something like that? But the reality is that our jails are full of people who have been charged with misdemeanors — non-violent offenses — who are sitting behind bars because they cannot afford to pay five hundred or a thousand dollars to buy their freedom. And, while they languish in jail, they miss rent payments. They lose their jobs. They don’t make child support payments. Studies have shown that the greater threat to society does not come from these citizens roaming the streets, but from the instability that comes when they stay in jail for weeks or months. And — no surprise — this issue disproportionately affects people who are black and brown, and communities with high rates of poverty.

So, the denomination’s leaders chose to use the money collected at the General Assembly’s Opening Worship to bail people out of jail. And money poured in to support the cause: From worshippers gathered in St. Louis, from worshippers scattered near and far who were watching online, the offering raised more than forty-seven thousand dollars.

And the following Tuesday — with that forty-seven thousand dollars in hand — hundreds of Presbyterians took to the streets. They marched to the City Justice Center to bail out people held for minor offenses, people who had been pre-screened for release.<sup>3</sup> They returned these people to their families, restored them to the community where they have the chance to be good workers and responsible parents. That day, our church was literally taking steps toward being a more faithful witness to Christ’s love in the world, because they understood that “Justice is what love looks like in public.”

Love hopes all things. Love hopes for a world in which *all* people — regardless of race or economic status, or any other marker of difference — receive a fair shot in this life. Love expects something better — better than broken systems that strip people of dignity and hope. Love seeks justice, and pursues it by advocating for the least of these. Love clings to God’s vision of wholeness, and compels us to follow Christ in proclaiming good news to the poor and release to the captives. Yes, love hopes all things.

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Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things ... Three stories. Three independent stories. Completely unrelated, except that they are all stories of love in action — of love made known in the surprising generosity of strangers, and in hours dedicated to helping a child know deep in his bones that he is special, and in feet hitting the street. Love expressed through charity, and service, and stepping out for the cause of justice.

Love has countless expressions. You know this already. You know that love is so much more than the effusive sentiment we imagine when we hear this passage recited at weddings. Though marriage ceremonies are the settings for most readings of this text, the Apostle Paul is not writing to lovers preparing to make a life-long commitment to one another, but to a community of Christians. And, while his words speak to the most cherished and intimate relationships of our lives, they are intended to instruct and encourage *all* of us as we strive to love one another and the world. They are intended to remind those of us who profess faith in Christ that the only way to *follow* Christ is to show forth his love. Because, without love, every good we might accomplish is done in vain.

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<sup>3</sup> See: Rick Jones, “Hundreds of Presbyterians join march to St. Louis’ Justice Center,” *General Assembly News*, June 19, 2018, <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2018/6/19/hundreds-presbyterians-join-march-st-louis-justice/>.

So — with the Spirit’s help — we pursue love. We seek to act in love — to make love known through charity, and service, and justice making. This community expresses love for one another by signing cards, week after week, so that sisters and brothers who’ve been in the hospital or who can’t join us for worship know they’re not forgotten. And by sending emails back and forth across an ocean and a language barrier to let a little church in Congo know they’re not alone. And by hosting families experiencing homelessness, so that these brothers and sisters in crisis know others care about their well-being. And by mentoring students from Urban Promise and Eastside Charter School, so they know their neighbors at Westminster share their hope for a better future ... Sharing love, spreading love through countless expressions and gestures, both large and small.

And through genuine love — love that bears all things, believes all things, and hopes all things — we become the body of Christ to the world.

\*Name has been changed.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Gracious God, Jesus has shown us the path to a beautiful and purposeful life. It is not a life of privilege, nor a life that seeks to control others, nor a life filled with possessions. He has shown us that the path to a rich life is paved with love – a life that dwells in the assurance that love is the heartbeat of the universe and that our truest reason for existing is to love – to love you, to love others and to love ourselves.

Without love, our words can sound eloquent, yet fall flat. Without love, our speech can be passionate, yet fail to motivate. Without love at our core, our words are judged vacuous.

Eternal God, remind us that love is recognized by the patience we have with others and the acts of kindness – great and small – that we extend to friends and strangers each day. Love is merciful and understanding, as gentle as a butterfly, yet is the most powerful force on earth.

Mighty God, we pray that we may always be mindful that love is  
superficial if we are envious,  
bogus if we are boastful,  
and counterfeit if we are rude.

Love does not celebrate  
forcing our will on others,  
does not seek revenge,  
and does not purposely deceive.

Love seeks to heal what is wounded,  
to mend what is broken,  
to pursue what is just.

Love rejoices in friendship,  
endures hardship,  
and exudes generosity.

Love applauds courage,  
reveres peace  
and strives for the common good.

Everlasting God, you urge us  
to place our trust in you,  
to cling to hope,  
and to love extravagantly.

God of grace, may we be ever mindful that of all that we do, the most vital of all is to love – to love you, to love others, and to love ourselves.

Now we join our voices together in the name of the one who was love incarnate, and pray the prayer he taught us to pray, saying, “Our Father, ...