

St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Sermon by Freya Gilbert
Wednesday, September 4, 2024

There's a glaring omission on the cover page of today's bulletin.

We are not just here to celebrate our new ministry, our renewal of ministry nor are we here just to welcome our new rector. No we are here to be present at the birth of a new world.

Our greatest contemporary philosopher, the Frenchman Alain Badiou said, and I quote: Love is always the possibility of being present at the birth of a new world.

We are present tonight at the birth of a new world.

It is the love of Fr. Erik for us, the love of St A's, St. Paul's for our Father Erik that makes it possible tonight to be present at the birth of a new world.

But, to be honest, our love kind of got off to a rocky start.

After all, Fr. Erik spent his first week on the job spending hour after hour, day after day at the College for Congregational Development with yours truly. My sigh of relief was so deep that first Sunday here when he actually still showed up. Even after I told him about our closely held, deeply treasured practice of ending the Good Friday services with a rendition of My Heart Will Go On. Even after I told him there was a parishioner who would go off in a corner and sulk if he wasn't wearing black shoes at the altar.

That's not what I'm talking about tonight, though. That was a laugh line.

No, I am talking about the glossy parish profiles that are part of every search process, the glossy ones where we put our best feet forward, where we photoshop our selfies and put our masks on. Before I go on, I do need to say that of the dozens and dozens of profiles I've read, ours was one of the finest, if not the finest. Thank you, discernment committee for a job so well done.

But still. Even the best parish profile is so much like an online dating site profile. In them we hide our deepest fears and our vulnerability. But our masks have cracks, don't they? We can hide, but we can't run. Sooner or later, the masks have to come off. We get a big huge zit the morning of our first date, within minutes of arriving at the restaurant we spill our drink all over ourselves, and we've gained say twenty pounds since our profile picture was taken.

In the words of James Baldwin, we are left with the hope that love will take off masks that we fear we cannot live without and we know that we cannot live within.

I don't think I'm revealing a deep, dark secret when I tell you that I wear wigs. Barring expensive, lengthy procedures, my hair loss is what it is.

The best way I have of showing someone that I love them is to let them see me with my wig off. I die a little bit inside first. I need to mourn the could haves, the should haves before I can celebrate the wild possibilities of my life. But wigs are like masks. Sooner or later, they have to come off. I can run, but I can't hide. Neither you, nor I can live within the masks we wear. Not if we want the possibility of being present at the birth of our own new worlds.

Brene Brown put it well: We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable selves to be deeply seen and known and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection.

Love is always the possibility of being present at the birth of a new world, even our own new worlds.

As we listened to tonight's Gospel we were present at the birth of a new world.

Jesus' love for his disciples, that night and tonight; Jesus' drawing his disciples into the love between his parent and himself-It is that love which allows us to take off the masks we fear we cannot live without and the masks we cannot live

within.

I would like to draw your attention to Jesus saying: I do not call you servants any longer but I have called you friends.

That's challenging isn't it, in today's church culture where servanthood is a buzz word. We have servant leaders and servant ministries. We sing the servant song.

But here's the thing about having servants. You can take off your mask in front of them, but it's not really being vulnerable, is it? Taking off your mask in front of a servant is a way of demonstrating power and control. And for the servant, it's a reminder of how little they matter, that they themselves are unseen. If you've ever worked in customer service, I think you know what I mean.

And so Jesus calls us friends, not servants, and so when Jesus tells us to love one another, he is telling us to love each other as friends. Jesus is allowing us to show our most vulnerable selves as a way of spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection. Jesus is inviting us to be present at the birth of a new world. And Jesus is loving us in a way that frees us to take off our masks.

It's funny, you know. Nowhere in tonight's Gospel does Jesus tell us to love him, and he doesn't even tell us to love the world.

I feel Jesus knows that we need a safe space to practice this new thing, this friendship, this love, this vulnerability. Jesus knows that it will take time for us to be comfortable without our masks.

And so Jesus gives us that safe space when he calls us to gather together as church. Jesus gives us that safe space tonight as we renew our baptismal vows. As we once again feel the waters of baptism washing our faces clean of our masks so that we can see in our friends' eyes what God sees when God looks at us and loves us.

In this renewal of our baptismal covenant, we will promise together to take our

masks off. It will be tough. It will be hard.

We will die a little bit. We may not have felt that we could live within our masks, but we fear that we cannot live without them.

Because nothing in our world prepares us for that kind of deep vulnerability.

That's exactly why we need to birth a new world, right here, right now.

As hard as it is for me to take off my wig in front of someone, even someone I love, you know what? When I do, I feel free. I feel so much joy, and I feel my power. The power I feel is the release of shame.

That is joy, my dear ones. That is joy. That is resurrection.

And so as we are gathered here together to celebrate the birth of a new world, we, perhaps slowly, perhaps cautiously release our shame, take off our masks, sense our power and feel the joy in it, the pure joy of it. Fr. Erik, St. A's, St. Paul's, friends from the future Episcopal Diocese of the Great Lakes, all here tonight to celebrate the freeing of the wild possibilities within ourselves as we become friends, and loved ones. As we keep the command of Jesus to love each other we rise from the dead to new life. We experience resurrection.

As friends, as loved ones tonight, we will, together, obey another command of Jesus.

We will gather around the table. With joy, gathered in power of Christ's resurrection, gathered in the power of our resurrection, as loved ones and friends, we will birth a new world with all its wonderful wild possibilities as we make Eucharist.

We will gather together as Christ allows his most vulnerable self to be deeply seen and tasted and known. And we will honor the connection that grows from that offering, from his offering in the Eucharist, from our offering in the Eucharist. We will honor that connection with trust, respect, kindness and affection as we gather and as we go forth.

We will begin to take off our masks. We will begin again, and begin again and

begin again all over again each and every time we gather around this table and each and every time we go forth from this place in the power and joy of resurrection.

The love with which Jesus loves us will become the love with which we love the world around us. May they experience the power and the joy of a life without the masks they could not live without, or within. Together, as friends, as loved ones, may we will live into all the wild and wonderful possibilities of our resurrection. And we **will** be present at the birth of a new world. We will birth a new world. Amen.