

## **Sermon Easter 5C 2022: The Strange Glory of God's Love – Our Love**

### **Introduction: The Difficulty of the Christian Life**

This Easter season, we are in a season of baptisms on Sunday and other days;

Welcoming persons of different ages into the Christian life;

Through the promises of parents and godparents;

Or, if they're adults, through promises they make for themselves.

And in a little more than a month,

Our Bishop will be here to baptize, to confirm and to receive

Over sixty people into the Christian faith for the first time through baptism

Or into a deeper commitment to our Lord in their lives

Through confirmation or by being received into the Episcopal Church.

These are always important, joy-filled occasions;

And I know that God will touch many lives;

But like a lot of us who call ourselves Christians

And who are trying to answer Christ's call on our lives, they're going to be surprised.

They're going to be surprised as most of us have been

At some point in our Christian journey;

Because being a Christian turns out to be a little different than we expected.

A lot of Christians today talk about a theology of glory or a Gospel of prosperity;

It's a popular view that says if you're a Christian, then life will be better for you;

That you'll go from one success to another because God will pamper you;

Because God will reward you materially for being a follower of Christ;

Because God will ensure that it pays to be a Christian.

So we're surprised when our investment in God and in living as though our faith matters;

Doesn't always bring the return we expected.

We give our lives to God: our hearts, our time, our talent, our treasure;  
But instead of lives that are always perfect and happy and fulfilling;  
We continue to face the struggles and pain and hardships that everyone faces;  
As though God's glory is somehow hidden or not even there.

Something inside of us expects that God should be treating us a little better  
Than the average woman or man who doesn't have a spiritual life;  
And while it's true that studies show that people who attend church  
Are usually healthier, happier, and live a little longer than those who sleep in;  
The surprising truth of the Christian life is that it doesn't bring the glory we hope for;  
At least not the power and glory we see in the world around us.

A friend of mine wonders if we've attached ourselves to the wrong religion;  
Or if God is really there at all;  
And we can be tempted to dump the whole business.

But for any of us who've been at this following Jesus for any length of time;  
For any of us who've been paying attention to the scriptures  
Or God's presence and power at work in our lives;  
We've come to understand that this following Jesus, living the life of faith;  
Is not about obtaining glory or material wellbeing or power for ourselves.

It's much more about responding to the glory that has been shown to us in Christ;  
Responding to God's patient, gracious, beautiful, caring, suffering, unending love;  
By living each day as those who are marked by a cross.

It's about living for the sake of the Risen One;  
Living for Christ who revealed God's glory in living and dying for us;  
And then allowing God's glory and God's power to shine through us;  
As we love and as we serve in Jesus' name.

## **The Gospel: Christ Glorified in Sacrifice**

The Gospel this morning, like the strange glory of the Christian life,  
Seems out of place, a surprising choice, given the season of the year.

We're well into the season of the Resurrection, the season of Easter;  
But the Gospel this morning takes us back in time to the Upper Room,  
Where Jesus is sharing the Last Supper with His first followers.

Judas the betrayer, has just left to make preparations to hand Jesus over to the authorities;  
And Jesus turns to His disciples, knowing that He's about to be betrayed;  
Knowing what He's about to face physically and spiritually and says,  
"Now the Son of Man's been glorified,  
Now God's glory is revealed through Him;  
So love one another as I have loved you."

It's as if in this moment when Judas leaves Jesus' side  
That God's true glory begins to be revealed;  
Not the charisma and miracles; not the amazing teaching and popularity;  
Not the power of the universe overwhelming people to believe and to follow;  
But in a total self-giving and sacrifice that saves us all  
A self-giving that shows the depths of God's love for you and me.

It's as if this little piece of John's Gospel that we read in the midst of the Easter season  
Holds together both the glory of God and God's call for our response –  
The unexpected surprise of the Christian life – a life of giving whatever the cost.

The Rev. John Braaten tells a story of a time when he was growing up on the family farm  
And he heard a commotion by the chicken coop;  
He ran to find a hen being savagely attacked by a red tail hawk;  
He picked up a stick to come to the hen's defense, but he was too late;  
And as the hawk flew off, the hen collapsed.

He looked sadly at the stricken hen, wondering to himself;  
Wondering why the hen hadn't fled to the safety of the chicken coop a few feet away;  
He wondered, but he knew.

And from under the wings of the dead hen  
Came four little chicks and on each of them was a mark of blood;  
The mark of a mother's love that sacrificed itself for their salvation.<sup>1</sup>

We Christians, we followers of Christ are a marked people, too;  
Marked by the blood of the Lamb of God, who allowed Himself to be sacrificed for us  
Who gave Himself in suffering love so that we might be saved;  
Who gave of Himself so that we might know God's glory at work in our lives;  
Even when things aren't going so well;  
Even when the glory in life is dimmed or hidden in some way.

This is the mark that's made on our foreheads when we're baptized;  
When the Bishop or the priest puts a little oil on their thumb;  
Signs the cross on our forehead and says we are marked as Christ's own forever  
Marked with the glory of God's suffering love;  
Marked with God's goodness and beauty and self-giving  
Marked and given a power and a calling to go and do likewise.

That's the unexpected surprise of the Christian life that most of us don't expect  
That's the glory and the power God reveals and that we're called to exercise  
In our love and in our care for others, whatever the cost;  
Jesus says that people will know you are my followers because you love;  
Nothing more, but certainly nothing less.

Oh, there are easier roads to travel in life than this following of Jesus;  
Easier ways to try and hang on to what's ours, to hang on to privilege;  
To hang on to a life that's protected from involvement,  
From caring, from suffering, from crosses, from love.

And it's not hard to understand why so many of us are tempted to buy into  
The theology of glory or the Gospel of Prosperity;  
Because it's the old story that assumes that if we are good, God will bless us.

But no one is good, Jesus says early in His ministry, no one is good except God;  
And you and I are already blessed; we're already touched by God's love;  
And it is this true glory that gives us our identity  
The glory that calls us to be God's children in the world as Jesus was;  
Children of all ages filled with the glory of God, radiating in our lives;  
Even in the midst of pain and hardship and suffering.

### **God's Glory Revealed in Us**

Clearly the glory to which we're called as Christians is a strange kind of glory;  
Rooted not in our goodness, but in God's faithfulness;  
Characterized not by our success in the world, but by our servanthood;  
Made known not by golden health, but by ready helpfulness;  
Not by a freedom from suffering,  
But a freedom for suffering for the life of the world.

Jesus' life and work came amidst the lonely, the outcasts, the poor and the powerless,  
The spiritually poor - people like us;  
And it is our glory to live like Him in love and service to others.

A couple overheard their two sons talking in church  
After the service and final hymn were over one Sunday morning;  
One of them, the older one, who was in confirmation class  
Was carefully explaining what all the parts of the liturgy were about.

The parents listened in as the older son asked his younger brother,  
"Do you know what it means at the end of the service when the priest does this?"  
Making the sign of the cross with a wide sweep of his arm.

The younger brother nodded his head; and whispered, "Sure, I know.

The love of God has come down on all of us!

Now some of you go out this way and some of you go out that way."

The parents laughed out loud, but the child was right.

The cross sends us and scatters us into the world – some this way, some that way;

Sends us and scatters us so that the strange glory of the Christian life,

So that the true love of God may be shared with all.

Someone once said that the really important thing for any church

Is not how many it seats, but how many it sends;

The important thing is how many it sends with that strange looking glory of God;

Sends with the greatest power and love the world has ever known;

Sends with the glory of a serving love for the life of the world.

And so on this Fifth Sunday in the Season of Easter;

This season of celebrating the glory of Christ's death and resurrection;

The season of our forgiveness and empowerment by God;

I invite you to remember that you, too, have been marked as Christ's own forever.

To remember and to live each day as a reflection of God's glory in the world;

Loving and serving in the power of God's love

So that all may know the love and glory of God that we are coming to know;

Some this way and some that way.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> John M. Braaten, *The Greatest Wonder of All*, CSS Publishing Co. 1991.