

The Word of God is a loving word. But it is also demanding. Honest love has always made demands. This message was delivered by Kate on Sunday, October 14, and is based on Hebrews 4:12-16 and Mark 10:17-31.

Once in a while, people ask me when I am going to preach a good fire and brimstone sermon. The problem is that I do not believe in a fire and brimstone God, an angry God whose commandments we ignore to our peril. No, I trust in a God who is with us when things get tough, who is closer than our heart-beat at every moment. Now, that said, neither do I believe in a God who is a pushover. Who is simply here to pull us out of tight spots and tell us how wonderful we are. In fact, the closeness of God is not always an easy thing. Because this God, who knows, loves, cradles and carries us, **never goes away!** The fact that we are accompanied and loved every day is a great blessing. But love that constant and intimate, that knows us through and through, is a love that makes demands on us. It will not settle for less than our being our unique and miraculous selves in this world.

The author of Hebrews recognizes this. He (or she) writes: “Indeed the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” The Word is alive and active. It is the presence of God in the world, the all-pervading Spirit, comforting and encouraging, yes, but also sharper than any two-edged sword, able to cut through anything. Particularly through lies and half-truths – all that we tell ourselves when we are not true to who we really are. Nothing can be hidden from this Word as it pierces through our most impregnable defenses. Yes, God is loving. But this love seeks out and demands our best. This love knows who we truly are and that is our real challenge.

I am reminded of school days. As a senior in high school, Mrs. Hastings was my English teacher. She was the one who never gave the easy A. She demanded more as she took the time to really know her students, their dreams and hopes, and the depth of their abilities. She knew I could write well before I

did, and nothing less would satisfy her. She called me “Miss Winters,” a sign of respect and of the seriousness with which she took her students. I worked harder for her than for anyone. I knew she could see right through me if I didn’t and I did not want to disappoint her. Mrs. Hastings was both a loving and demanding teacher. She wanted us to shine.

And so does God. The gospel today gives us the story of the rich young man. He has gone to ask Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus reminds him of the commandments, to which the young man responds, “Yes, I have kept all of these since youth.” And then... “Jesus, looking at him, **loved him...**”

Here was the love that cuts through appearances and defenses, the love that could see what the man was made of. I expect the young man felt that love. Jesus touches his very core with his next request. “Go, sell what you own, give to the poor, and follow me.” As any good teacher, Jesus addresses the growing edge of his student, right where he wrestles with his potential. The young man is grieved at this request, he knows it will not be easy, and walks away sad. He didn’t get his easy A. He has been challenged. The Word of God has pierced his defenses, and it will no doubt continue to work on him, calling him to the next step of discipleship. But notice, **it is love, not anger** or expectation, which calls him to it.

God is love and love makes demands. On this, the eve of our 24th wedding anniversary, I can say that nothing, besides having a child perhaps, makes more demands on a person than marriage. When Joel and I were married, a part of our vows read “I promise to call you to your best self, in the name of the God of creativity, compassion, and joy.” Little did we know how many places we would live or all the things we would have to face and conquer to keep that vow. I know I am able to be here today because of the sacrifices he has made to call me to

growth. I am blessed by our love...but love makes demands. It sees the true self, it affirms it, and asks us to get right in there and wrestle with our growing edges. We still wrestle with them, but I know as we go away for a few days of vacation and retreat, we will do it together. Because love makes demands, and as long as you don't ignore them, you, and love, grows.

Now, soon after we return, there will be an election in our country. I almost hesitate to mention it because I am and most of us are sick of politics as it is. And there are those who have just shut down because they do not believe that such talk belongs in church. But indeed every word spoken here is a political one, because God has a politics, a politics of justice and love that is meant to bring on the realm or kingdom of God in this world. When Jesus asks the young man to sell all he had to give to the poor, he was speaking politics. Attend to the weak, to the poor, to the downtrodden...in your life, in your nation, in your town, now! This is **Jesus's agenda**.

William H. Lamar, pastor of the Metropolitan AME church in Washington, DC, writes these words in latest *Christian Century*: "Whenever we deploy words, especially in the service of God, we are acting politically. There is no such thing as non-political language...The church is a praying, singing, preaching, witnessing body. We witness to the in-breaking

of God's reign of love, justice, beauty, and abundance in [actual] time and space. We lament brokenness, evil, and violence...Our prayers, songs, sermons, and testimonies are acts of political speech...it is the speech of God's new creation...the church's language has the ambitious agenda of making all things new. And that is political."

The Word of God alive and present during this and every election year asks this: "Will my decisions support God's agenda or the agenda of out of control wealth and power?" And "Am I voting **out of love or fear**?" As followers of Jesus, we are meant to wrestle with these questions. Just like the rich young man today. God knows we are up to them and is looking at us with both rich and demanding love, wanting us to be our whole selves, our best selves, and our best and whole nation. **Not**, may I add, a **Christian** nation, but a nation that, like Jesus, cared for and welcomed all people. The core of all major religions is **compassion**.

So, no, I won't be delivering a fire and brimstone sermon very soon. But if I am true to myself, to you, to this congregation, and this nation, I will be talking about love, a love that is wondrous and beautiful, and a love that makes demands in order to bring on the new creation. Since with God nothing is impossible, we are up to it! Amen.