

## *Love is a Verb*

Homily notes from the Celebration of the Life of Jenny Birtwell  
January 1944 – August 2023

We're together today as people who are grieving. Grief is complicated: it can come unexpectedly, and it can be contagious, especially if you're standing in front of grieving people. I take some solace in the text from Isaiah, often used to describe Jesus, "He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."<sup>1</sup>

Anticipatory grief is a real thing too. Today's gospel text is a moment of anticipatory grief for Jesus when he says to his disciples, "I am with you only a little longer."<sup>2</sup> He said this at his last supper, just before washing the disciples' feet and giving them the new commandment to love one another.

Jenny knew about anticipatory grief. As her health declined, she found purpose in designing this memorial service. Is that a strange thing to do? Not for Jenny, since for well over 40 years she attended many services for beloved parishioners here and she knew how strengthening these times were to her and to the families most closely affected. She planned today's music, texts, prayers, even this homily which she all but wrote for me. A couple of days before she died, she told me about the theme for the homily, this service and really her life: her chosen theme—love is a verb. And she relayed the story of how this came to be.

About 20 years ago the Cathedral's practice through the season of Epiphany was to invite members of the congregation to preach Sunday mornings on the theme 'how my faith influences my life, and my life influences my faith.' Jenny was invited and took her turn.

Characteristically she prepared diligently. She developed and administered a survey amongst her coworkers, students, family, and friends: she asked them to define *love*. She was surprised that most all of the responses defined love as something, as a noun as people described a person they loved, or a place, or a thing like a feeling or an emotion. She thought that was wrong; her Epiphany sermon took another tack; its theme was that Love is a verb. Not a noun, but a verb—love is action.

I don't remember the sermon specifically—maybe some of you do. But Jenny remembered it because the preparation crystallized something for her: it crystallized her operative theology. Love is a verb. As she told me about this, her eyes sparkled because she thought it would be good idea to have T-shirts designed with the words *Love is a verb* on them, and they could be sold after this service, with proceeds going to the 127 Society for Housing. Ian and I gently suggested that a memorial service wasn't quite the right time to flog merchandize.

But you see, even in her dying she wanted love—and there's lots of love here today—to be not just a feeling but an action, a verb. Don't just say love. Practice love. It's a pretty good

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 53:3

<sup>2</sup> John 13: 33-35

theology. And you can honour her by living it—by putting into action the love you have for others.

It was good enough for Jesus. After he said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another...By this everyone will know that you are my disciples...” he washed the feet of his disciples. And lest we think that foot washing was simply a ritual, remember that feet, in that time, would be dirty and sore from walking in sandals along dusty roads. To wash another’s feet was to put love in action; love is a verb.

Jenny, a thoughtful theologian, was in good company in her affirmation that love is a verb. She is company with the author of the letter of James, a New Testament epistle beloved of some but almost omitted from the Bible because of its strong affirmation of the connection between belief and action. It’s in James that we find this verse, “What good is it...if you say you have faith but do not have works?”<sup>3</sup> Jenny’s in good company with the author of the letter of John who makes the theological connection very clear: “God is love, and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them.”<sup>4</sup> Here it is spelled out clearly: love is a verb, love is God, God is love. Pushing this just a wee bit further—God is a verb. God is no ‘thing’. Cathedral parishioner Professor Bill Crockett expressed it in this way, “God is the energy of love at the heart of the universe.”<sup>5</sup>

We experience God in the beauty of the earth, the serenity of music and through acts of loving service; and we can also know God in our grief. It was our late Queen Elizabeth who, speaking after the September 11<sup>th</sup> bombing in New York said words that have become popular wisdom, “Grief is the price we pay for love.” Her Majesty was paraphrasing words from a psychiatrist, Dr. Colin Murray Peakes who wrote: “*The pain of grief is just as much part of life as the joy of love: it is perhaps the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment.*” Both love and grief are verbs.<sup>6</sup> Actions. And we can express our care for each other as we experience grief together.

Three final thoughts:

First, an expression of Jenny’s comes to mind; when she led the prayers of the people, in the section where the departed are remembered, she used the phrase, “those who have died to this earthly life.” It always struck me as profound; we die to this life—with the implication that life continues, but in another way.

Second: followers of Jesus are people of hope; hope of eternal life. We hear this in the liturgy when there are references to the company of heaven. Frederick Buechner wrote this: “And “all the company of heaven” means everybody we ever loved and lost, including the ones we didn’t know we loved until we lost them ... It means people we never heard of. It means everybody who

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<sup>3</sup> James 2: 14

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 4: 16

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.vancouver.anglican.ca/news/god-is-the-power-of-love-and-energy-at-the-heart-of-the-universe>

<sup>6</sup> <https://camtaylor.net/2021/08/26/grief-the-price-for-love/>

ever did—or at some unimaginable time in the future ever will—come together at something like this table in search of something like what is offered at it.”<sup>7</sup> Whenever we hear the words *the company of heaven* in the future, we know that Jenny is now part of that heavenly host.

And finally, because Jenny loved poetry and prayer, some words posted this morning on his Facebook page by the Bishop of Missouri, Deon Johnson<sup>8</sup>, himself a pray-er and a poet, and with these I close.

Holy One,  
Help us create,  
Poetry out of pain,  
Symphony out of sorrow,  
Art out of anger,  
Singing out of sadness,  
Dancing out of despair,  
Grace out of grief,  
Love out of loss.

Amen and Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/11/16/communion-of-saints>

<sup>8</sup> <https://lgbtreligiousarchives.org/profiles/deon-johnson>