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Being For Otherness

Please pray with me…

Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Our scripture from Colossians this morning tells us to clothe ourselves with love. Jesus also tells us in the Great Commandment that we are to love God with all of our heart, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We know this commandment well, just as we have heard many times that God is love. Most of us generally have a notion of what this means. Many of us know the feeling of love because we've felt it for a partner, a parent, a sibling, or a friend. But love is more than a feeling; it's an action, and when we truly love others, we act in certain ways. So what does it look like to clothe ourselves in love?

One of my favorite humorous examples of love is the dog Dug from the movie Up. In the film, the two main characters are lost in the fog in a foreign country, and, out of nowhere, this fluffy, sandy dog runs up to them from out of the mist and says, "My name is Dug. I have just met you and I love you!"

I laugh every time I see this part of the movie because this is exactly how most dogs behave. They might bark for a second when they first meet you, then, suddenly, they love you (which you know because they wag their tale, start licking

your face and snuggling up to you). Most dogs love instantly, without judgement, forever.

In some ways, they are a model for how we are to love…unconditionally and extravagantly. Moreover, like Dug the dog, we shouldn't have to wait to get to know our neighbors before we love them.

But we see another model in our Gospel lesson this morning, through the actions of Jesus. In this story, Jesus sees the ways that people are being taken advantage of by the church itself and he just loses it. He starts knocking over tables and yelling. In some ways, this display of anger can seem unloving to many of us, especially those of us who were raised to believe that we need to always be nice and never display anger. But Jesus' love for his people, especially the marginalized and poor, is so strong, that anger is the only right emotion to feel when he sees them harmed as they are—especially by the church that should be loving and protecting them. He shows us that, sometimes, love can and needs to look like anger.

These kinds of love as displayed here by Jesus and Dug and discussed by Paul are what my favorite theologian, Justo Gonzalez, calls being-for-otherness. Being-for-otherness means existing, being, and acting entirely out of a selfless, outrageous and extravagant love—a desire and hope for the best good that is possible for all others, even at the expense of self. As Paul notes in our reading from Colossians, it can mean

acting with compassion, caring and kindness: Smiling at folks at the grocery store, even when we're in a bad mood; serving meals to our family or to people who don't have food (who we might consider our extended family); listening and comforting the grieving; reading a book to child. As Jesus shows us, it can look like turning over tables and calling out hypocrites. These can all be acts of love where our purpose is to bring goodness, thriving or protection to others, and generally put another's needs first.

But being for others goes deeper than these actions. *Being* for others refers to how we *are*, existentially, not just how we feel or act. It refers to the very nature of our selves. In other words, what Gonzalez is saying by describing love as "being for otherness" is that the way we should *be*, all the time, is in a state of for-otherness. It means that our whole self is tuned in to others, focused on them, who they are, and what they need to thrive. And this is a lot more difficult than the actions I've described so far because this kind of love requires a great deal of self-knowledge and self-control.

Maybe it's counter-intuitive to say that love, for-otherness, requires deep self-knowledge. For-otherness sounds like, well, we need to focus on others. But we cannot give our whole selves, our whole being, to others, unless we know ourselves well enough to recognize how we might get in the way of our own work and the strategies we can use to

overcome those self-made roadblocks . Let me give you an example.

In her book, *I'm Still Here: Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, Austin Channing Brown describes the Sankofa trip that she took in college. This three-day trip explores Black history in the United States in partnership with another student, mainly comprised of one black and one white person.[1] One of the early stops they made was to a museum on the history of lynching, which contained pictures, descriptions, newspaper articles, and letters. After the museum, the only sound on the bus was sniffles, until a few white students began to speak. Their first reaction was to say things like, "I didn't know that this had happened," and "it wasn't my fault; I wasn't there." As Brown explains, "they reached for anything that would distance themselves from the pain and anger of the moment; anything to ward off the guilt and shame, the shock and devastation."[2] This reaction is fairly common for most white people when confronted with racism. Most people want to think of ourselves as good people. We Christians, in particular, want to do our best to live out Jesus' teachings to love one another. So when confronted with the racism that is endemic to our past and our present country, most white people (myself included) respond to the

[1] Austin Channing Brown, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness,* New York: Convergent Books, 2018, 54.
[2] Ibid, 57.

corresponding guilt with a belligerent defensiveness. This is not helpful anger born out of love, but an anger born out of defensiveness and a desire to see oneself as good. In Brown's book, this defensiveness grew worse as the black students started to share their own reactions to the lynching museum: "personal stories of pain—lynchings that happened to [their] own families,"[3] connections between the black bodies they saw in the photographs and current, living black bodies, as well as connections between the white bodies they saw and current, living white bodies.

In other words, black people shared their stories of trauma, terror, and horror. At this moment, if not before, being-for-otherness should have required compassion, kindness, and shared anger from the white students. But that's not what happened. Now, it may, indeed, be common for guilt to overwhelm white folks and to cause defensiveness, but assuaging white guilt is NOT more important than offering care to victims of trauma and racism. True being-for-otherness requires that we overcome this defensiveness, especially before speaking. Being-for-otherness requires that we feel this guilt, transform it into a sense of responsibility, and allow it to impel us towards some kind of healing action. It requires that we put the needs of the other before ourselves.

[3] Ibid.

To do that, we need to know ourselves well enough to know that this kind of defensiveness is likely, especially among white people living in the United States. So we have to know to expect it, plan to sit with it, and have strategies in place for how to turn our hearts and minds away from our own guilt and towards others.

In Brown's story, this white defensiveness went on for a while, and the black students continued to try to make their own reactions clear. The divisiveness on the bus became worse and worse. Finally, a white woman said this:

> I don't know what to do with what I've learned…I can't fix your pain, and I can't take it away, but I can see it. And I can work for the rest of my life to make sure your children don't have to experience the pain of racism….Doing nothing is no longer an option for me. (Austin Channing Brown goes on to say this): Those words changed the air on that bus. She acknowledged the depth of our pain without making excuse for it. And in that moment, I knew her words were true for me as well. Something shifted inside me on this trip. Something powerful and unmistakable. Doing nothing was no longer an option for me."[4]

Being-for-otherness means seeing others, their pain, their fears, their grief. It means hearing their experiences and

[4] Ibid, 58.

accepting those experiences as real, even if what we hear causes us guilt or horror. And it means showing that we care, that we truly love them, through our words and actions. Both Austin Channing Brown and the white woman committed the rest of their lives to anti-racist work because what they witnessed both off and on that bus helped them to fully and deeply feel the way that racism can harm others. And being-for-otherness does not allow harm to the beloved. And this leads me to my final point.

The concept of being-for-otherness has sometimes been misused, especially by those in power, to oppress others. One of the worst forms of this oppression was chattel slavery. Wealthy white people insisted that people of color were made for others. This view, that black people are made for whites, became deeply embedded in the very fabric of society in the United States and is still a large underlying part of racism.

We can also see a type of oppression where others insist that we be for them in other social, family, and work systems as well. Many women are expected to be-for-all-the-others in their family, giving up much needed relaxation and self-care, and becoming subservient (which is different from love). Sometimes a single child (male or female) is somehow designated as the care-giver in the family, so all the for-otherness falls on them. This can particularly happen in families with addictions. One child is the “good,” “caregiving,” child who keeps the family together and tries to bring peace

and harmony, thus enabling the problematic behaviors of the addicted person. In all of these cases, this enforced selflessness or subservience becomes internalized and thus the caregiver, the woman, or the person of color starts stepping into this role all of the time, even when outside of the original system.

This is not real for-otherness or love, mainly because it is externally forced or imposed. Real love or for-otherness cannot be coerced, and this includes all forms of internalized oppression. Coerced for-otherness or internalized oppression that has morphed into selflessness is manipulation and subservience. It is damaging to everyone involved because it denies the inherent worth of the caregiver, and it denies everyone else the opportunity to be for THEM.

Let me be clearer: Scripture tells us that every single one of us is made in the image of God. We are inherently worthy, inherently lovely, and inherently bearing the image of God in our very selves. The being-for-otherness spoken of in Colossians and in the Great Commandment does not require us to deny this inherent worth. If, at any time, we allow others to dehumanize us, or if we dehumanize ourselves, we have slipped away from love. Racism and sexism are forms of dehumanization. When people take advantage of us and use us as an end for their own gain, we are dehumanized. Likewise, when we allow others to dehumanize us, instead of

correcting them or standing up for ourselves, then we deprive others of their for-otherness.

In the case of Brown's story of the Sankofa trip, we find that the black students on the bus refused to be dehumanized. When the white students tried to save themselves from guilt by pushing aside the black students' deeply human pain, the black students persisted in telling their stories and even started to express true anger for the way that they and their families had been treated. In their anger, they insisted on their own inherent worth and the worth of their experiences. This insistence, this willingness to offer what Paul calls wisdom and correction to others, seems to have made an impact on the white woman at the end of the story and allowed her to be-for-them. The result, then, was that the tensions started to melt and more white folks were willing to listen to, grieve with, and feel anger right along side the black students. Likewise, Brown herself awoke to her own need to fight against racism, not simply for the sake of others, but for the sake of herself—one of God's image bearers on earth.

What love is, at its core, is complex because love, being-for-otherness, is a paradox. It is a way of being that is entirely focused on the well-being and full-thriving of all others. It is an imitation of Dug-the-Dog who loves immediately, without judgement, without expecting that the beloved merits it. But love is also simultaneously an awareness that the self is an

other who is inherently worthy of love. Thanks be God. Amen.