

## “Good Work”

First Sunday in Lent

Matthew 4:1-11; Philippians 1:1-11

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Brandi Carlile performed in Minneapolis last night. I was not fortunate enough to attend the concert. Which is too bad, because I really enjoy her music. And this latest album, *Returning to Myself*, is exemplary. One of the songs from that album has been resonating with me in the weeks leading up to the start of Lent—“Human.”

She sings:

*We're only human  
I don't need to see how it ends  
To tell you that we'll never be here again  
We're only human  
I just wanna feel my face in the sun  
I never really wanted to hurt anyone  
Forever only means we had a good run  
We don't need to know to right now  
It's hard enough being human*

One reviewer wrote about her performance of this song at her concert in Boston the other day:

The vocals and guitar made it feel like everyone had been stripped down to their souls; for a moment any vendettas and hate had been put away, and the crowd stood there feeling as, well, human as they have ever felt.

Carlile’s lyrics “It’s hard enough being human” truly made you feel seen. Any past mistakes and regrets were dispelled by Carlile’s voice.

Brandi Carlile herself has commented on the song that

“Human” is about striking a really difficult balance, first recognizing that we’re here for a very short period of time, like the blink of an eye, and that we have got to find a way to be happy in the chaos. We have to find a way for all to be well with our soul while we’re here in this split second.

It is hard enough being human. This Lenten season I want to invite us into an exploration of our humanity. Lent always invites us to reflect, to examine ourselves. To discover our sins and shortcomings, to repent and develop the spiritual habits to heal and grow. And this particular Lent, I want to invite us into an exploration of what it means to flourish as a human being. It is hard enough being human, and we’ve been through difficult chapters of our lives the last few years. How do we move through periods of trouble and suffering and still flourish? As the song “Hymn of Promise” states, “in the cold and snow of winter, there’s a spring that waits to be, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.” During the season of Lent we begin to look forward to the resurrection. And find the signs of promise all around us that new life, new creation is coming and coming soon.

So, for our Lenten exploration I’ve decided to focus on Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. This text is full of rich wisdom on what it means to be the people of God and how we find gratitude, joy, and peace in

the midst of difficulties. Paul wrote the letter while in prison, himself experiencing dark and difficult days. But even in that time of trouble, he writes this exuberant letter.

Paul opens this letter by describing the people of the Philippian church as “all the saints in Christ Jesus,” which the great Fred Craddock, in his commentary on this passage, described as “God’s act of claiming them as God’s people, consecrated, bound in a covenant.” He goes on to elaborate that these people had been “called to be God’s people in that time and place.” That we believe the letter speaks also to us, two thousand years later, we can make sense of it that we too are God’s people, consecrated, bound in covenant, and called by God to do God’s good work in this particular time and place. Paul is grateful for these people, his co-workers in the mission of God. God had begun a good work in them, and Paul is confident that God will see it to completion.

In deep affection, Paul prays for these people, that they might grow in love. Fred Craddock describes that love this way:

A love that is joined to knowing and understanding, to probing and discerning, to putting itself to the test in real-life situations and making moral choices in matters that count.

This is not sentimental love, but hard won and active in the time of trial, doing God’s good work. Again, if we see ourselves as also in the audience of this letter, then we too are co-workers with the apostle, achieving God’s mission. God has begun a good work in us, and God will see it to completion.

And one of the ways that good work is fulfilled is through our growing in this kind of fierce, active love.

To better understand the contemporary ethical implications of our call to this good work, I turn to the sociologist Amanda Udis-Kesler and her helpful book *Abundant Lives: A Progressive Christian Ethic of Flourishing*. Udis-Kesler provides one of the more straightforward definitions I love that I’ve ever read—“I define love as the work we do to flourish in all aspects of our lives and to help all other people flourish in all aspects of their lives.” What it means to love others is to be truly and fully committed to their health, well-being, and happiness. Plus, to be truly loving other people, we must be committed to our own health, well-being, and happiness.

These notions are so straightforward and simple, yet they remain so radical. So many people still approach love as self-sacrifice for another. Or fail to understand that love is more than affection or feeling but doing the good work to assist others in having a better life. And we’ve seen lately that even the most basic compassion and respect for other human beings is still a challenge for many. Much less the robust work that is involved in the love ethic that Christ calls us to. Udis-Kesler delineates some details of what it truly means to love ourselves and one another. She writes that love includes:

- Ensuring that we and they have access to resources necessary for survival (clothes, shelter, nutritious and safe food, clean water, clean air, and sanitary environments);
- Ensuring that we and they have access to appropriate, comprehensive, and affordable healthcare;
- Protecting our safety and the safety of others, keeping [us all] free from physical . . . violence and other kinds of harm;
- Protecting ourselves and others from emotional stressors such as trauma and protracted fear that can wear on bodies over time; and
- Ensuring bodily autonomy for ourselves and for others so that all of us have control over who we use our bodies and over what happens to our bodies.

That's quite the list. And it reveals how often our love falls short of the ideal that Jesus calls us to. But this is the good work we should be about if we are to help each with the hard work of being human. These are the things that all of us require as basics if we are going to flourish as God intended.

And you noticed protection and healing from trauma on that list. I believe trauma care is going to become very important for our ministry here in the Twin Cities in the months ahead. We've protested, we've organized for mutual aid, and now we are going to have to come together to help each other heal from what all we have experienced and are still experiencing. Trauma care will be part of the specific good work God requires of us in the days ahead. Another way to love ourselves and love our neighbors.

This week the country reflected upon the life and legacy of the Rev. Jesse Jackson. One of my friends from college wrote on Facebook about her experience with Rev. Jackson, growing up as a Black girl in Chicago and attending his church. She said,

My greatest memory is Jesse Jackson in his clergy robe standing at the top of the church steps, having all the young people lined up and as we walked one-by-one into the building you had to look him in the eye and boldly declare "I am somebody!" If you said it too shyly, no worries he just had you say it again. I wonder how many us kids now get the message Jesse Jackson was giving us then...created by God on purpose, for purpose and a purpose you MUST NOT leave this earth without completing! Yes, both black and valuable!

Jesse Jackson was always pointing out how the nation needed to see and respond to "the desperate, the damned, the disinherited, the disrespected, and the despised." That our public policy should be aimed at the least of these and the outsiders, making sure that they had what they needed in order to try to live a better life. His life is a testament to doing the hard, good work.

So, this Lent I want to invite us into reflection on what it means to do the good work of Jesus Christ, individually and collectively in the church.

Are we loving ourselves by doing the good work of healing our hurts, of cultivating the virtues, of growing spiritually?

Are we loving each other by doing what we can to assure that everyone can flourish? That includes both our immediate care for those around us and our systemic work to build a better society.

What do we mean by flourishing?

Here is Amanda Udis-Kessler's description of what she means:

By flourishing, I mean *getting to have a good life*. A flourishing life is not free of pain or difficulties, but it is also filled with joy, satisfaction, accomplishment, and contribution to the well-being of others. In such a life, we experience abundance, delight, meaning, fullness, and wholeness; our joy and gratitude then lead us to work toward the same thriving for other people and for the planet. Flourishing humanity is humanity at its best, and we can take the fullest advantage of our human capabilities when we flourish.

She admits that there is an aspirational quality to this description. But what a great goal to aspire to! And, to me, it resonates with what Paul is writing to the Philippians. The life of grace, peace, gratitude, love, and wisdom that he prays they might experience.

To experience this good life for ourselves and to ensure it for others is the good work that God has called us to.

It is hard enough being human. So let's do the good work of loving ourselves and each other, to make it a little easier on all of us, that together we might experience the glory of the life that God desires for us all.