

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter: John 17:1-11

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Long as I can remember, I've loved books. When I was a kid, Pizza Hut had this deal where every time you finished a book, you'd get a sticker, and when you got enough stickers, you'd get a free personal pan pizza. It was quite the motivator. As my schooling went on, I discovered that good writing had a way of transporting a little poor kid into magical places. Bridge to Terabithia and Where the Red Fern Grows were early standouts, Hatchet, too. But then reading got harder. There'd be times where some book'd come along, and it felt like every word was a boot stuck in mud, and trudging through the pages was just plain exhausting. Those I did not like one bit. Also, I was doing so many other things that I got tired, and reading often turned into dozing. I even failed my book report on The Giver because once I'd read about halfway through, I fell asleep but my hands kept turning the pages. Apparently, I gave a full and accurate account not of the book but of the sleep-reading dream I had instead!

Fast-forward through the rest of my academic career and all the books I read along the way, some greats, some stinkers, most resold at the end of the semester for a fraction of the purchase price. Then, in seminary, I read more than I'd ever read before. Steve and I shared a study carrel, and we treated time on campus like a fulltime job. We'd go in at 8:00 for Morning Prayer and stay at the seminary until around 5:00. If we weren't in class, we were drinking coffee and reading. And then we'd go home, sit on the porch and complain about how awful things were in that idyllic place, come back around to how amazing it was to be in that idyllic place, and then go back to reading before it all started again the next day. Ok, that's not 100% true. We watched a lot of shows, too, which was kinda like reading because everything we watched had actors with accents, so we needed subtitles. What? That totally counts.

Once I finished seminary, I didn't want to look at another book. I'd also let my schedule get so out of control that I couldn't've read if I'd wanted to. 80-hour weeks weren't unheard of in that first church. I had no work-life balance. I just had work. At the same time, all those seminary professors sent us on our way with book recommendations, and I'd collected a mighty library of tomes that I hoped made me look smarter than I am. I figured having them on the shelves would eventually leech some of their contents into my head like some kind of literary osmosis. But then parishioners recommended books, and I wanted to read them, so I happily put them on my To Read pile on my desk which got progressively closer to tipping over. (Now don't get me wrong, I still want your recommendations!) When Becca and I came up here, we moved over a thousand books, technically enough to qualify as an official Private Library. Thank God for movers with strong backs! But here, the problem only got worse. I kept getting book recs, and the teetering pile turned into two teetering piles leaning against each other for architectural support. Eventually, they commandeered their own shelf. There were so many that I split my reading list in two: Hard Books and Brain Candy.

When I came down with Covid, I picked up one of those books I'd started to read but had only made it partway through. With nothing else going on, I finished it in a day. So I picked up the next book in my started-but-not-finished collection, and plowed through it, too. I had something like 13 books in various stages of unread, and once I finished all of them, I had this momentum, so I just kept chipping away at those teetering To-Read lists. At my most voracious, I was regularly reading four books a week. I'm still going on this book-a-thon, though my pace has slowed. This year, I knew that, left to my own devices, I'd only read Brain Candy, which'll rot your brain teeth, so I devised a system. As much as I read last year, I've still got a lot to go. So, I cut little strips of paper and numbered them 1-80 and put those strips in each book on my list. Then, 81-100 are sorta like free squares, something from the library or my noncorporeal online list. And then, I got myself a 100-sided die. Every time I finish a book, I roll the die, and whatever number comes up, that's what I read next. So far it's kinda fun and it keeps me honest. I haven't gotten any personal pan pizzas out of the deal,

but I'm reading up a storm. As much fun as I've been having, though, there is a bittersweet side to it because every book comes to an end. Now, there are several that that end is a relief. But most of what I've read, I've enjoyed. And when they end, there's a loss. Sometimes it's satisfying, sometimes it lets me down, sometimes it's all so utterly perfect that I'm not ready for the final page. And sometimes, when it's something really special, sometimes there's a sense of grieving when the characters are gone and the world dissipates into the ether. Goodbyes are always hard, and good books are hard to let go.

You know, we hear all these churchy stories in church, but if we really want to get into the meat of what's going on, we gotta sit down and read. Those books pile up, an intimidating library of 66 books weighed down by millenia of interpretations and doctrines and a million million people who've read 'em before we were even born. Six weeks ago now, Jesus rose from the dead. Y'all, I want to pause right there for a second. We talk about that singular moment so often that it just might've lost its wonder. Jesus, that preaching philosopher, that Son of God and Son of Man, died. He was dead. D-E-D Dead. People saw it, made sure of it, buried him, sealed him off behind a wall of stone, and he came back to life! I mean, y'all know the story, but when was the last time you stopped to let the wonder of it rise from the page? Jesus rose from the dead. He hung around for a while, got his last lectures in, read a few more stories, unraveled a few more pages, and finally, rose from this world. And that makes me wonder if Jesus felt the bittersweet loss of an ending. I mean, not everything ends then. We turn the page to another story's beginning, but as he ascends, maybe he feels the love of what he had mixed in with a loss borne of a fondness for being with us at all.

Now, for us booklovers, there's a wrinkle over in the beginning of the Gospel of John where Jesus is called the *Logos*, the Word, the Word Made Flesh, the walking, talking, miracle-making library of God's story, the Good Book thrown open to anyone that longed to hear what the Word had to say. And now, as his feet leave the ground the last page on that particular installment comes to an end with the final punctuation resting quietly on the page. I can imagine "To Be Continued" written tantalizingly where he once stood. Of course, the story doesn't end there. There've been countless sequels, spinoffs, and non-canonical adventures. There've been troubling volumes, and there've been real groundbreakers. And the story keeps on going, keeps on getting written.

You know, there's this idea that we are all members of the Body of Christ. That's a thing of unity, even a thing of responsibility: we are Christ's hands in this world Teresa of Avila says. But I wonder if members of the Body of Christ are somehow tied up with The Word, too. *If* Jesus is the Word, *and* we're part of his Body then we're part of his story, too. We have a story to tell. Each of us has our proud moments; each of us has our less proud moments. But we all unfold a plot with characters and twists and more lessons than we ever wanted to learn. Some pages are a slog and others speed by too quickly. And in the end, a life fills its pages of days, and it comes to rest in a long line of stories building up that single Body of Christ we've tried to embody along the way.

In his primer on The Orthodox Church, Timothy Ware challenges us to "become what you are." In other words, by virtue of being human, you are already sacred, holy, and inspiring -- each a story unto yourself. Live in such a way that you become that. We are nothing less than the Body of Christ, a fascinating, troubling, challenging story unfolding across time. Our stories, an ongoing incarnation of the Word Made Flesh, an entire library where we find God. That's a real gift and, if I'm honest, that sacred collection's a real challenge, too. I'm picturing all of humanity as my teetering To Read piles with every book containing some unique knowledge of God. I guess we'd better get to reading!

Become what you already are, St. Thomas': that sacred library of the Word Made Flesh, that holy library of the Word Made Flesh, that inspiring library of the Word Made Flesh. Throw open your pages and tell your story. The world desperately needs that Word.