

*Based on Psalm 118. On the Steadfast Love of God*

*Who do you love? Tell me who you love.*

These were the words that came out of my mouth as I tried to minister with a woman named Mary in her hospital room, as she was crying out in pain in the middle of the night, when nothing else would calm her down.

*Tell me who you love.*

I was a seminarian, spending the summer as a hospital chaplain in an internship program called Clinical Pastoral Education at Cabell Huntington Hospital on the other side of the state. I was terrified.

On that night early on in the summer, the call came at three in the morning. *We can't calm her down*, the nurses said when I arrived. Mary—their patient—was writhing in pain, crying out for her children, and just plain hurting. The nurses had other patients to attend.

They had given her all the pain medication they could, they had soothed her wounds as best they could, they had done everything they knew how to do. So they called me. And I, of course, was blonde and clueless, begging the Spirit for guidance in a situation that was far beyond my expertise and experience.

I took a deep breath and then held Mary's hand. I asked her what had happened. She said she had been in a car accident. That her son had been with her. That he had been hurt but not killed.

Which was followed by silence and then more cluelessness on my end. More writhing and crying on her end. I asked Mary where she hurt, and she told me. It occurred to me that chaplains are supposed to offer prayer, so I prayed aloud for each of those places in Mary that hurt, hoping the prayer would calm her down.

It did not.

Mary still writhed in pain, she still cried out in anger and agony. I began to panic. It was then, in my moment of despair, that the words just came out of my mouth.

*Who do you love, Mary? Tell me who you love.* Even as the words reverberated through my ears I knew they were exactly the right words because they were God's words through me.

Mary's response was immediate. *I love my children*, she said. And you could tell by the smile that just barely graced her face that she was imagining their faces in her mind's eye.

*Tell me about your children*, I said. And Mary spent the next twenty minutes describing their young lives in vivid detail. What they looked like, what they ate, where they would go hiking together in the West Virginia

hills. What she wanted to say to them now that they were separated by her accident. How worried she was that they felt abandoned by her, even as she so desperately wanted to be with them.

As Mary talked about the ones she loved her breathing slowed. Her jaw unclenched. Her eyes drooped. She was finally ready to rest. Love had worked when nothing else had.

As I rested her hand back down on the hospital bed and prepared to leave the bedside of a woman who was now enveloped in the peace that passes understanding, Mary whispered to me, *Thank you. I love you, too.*

*Brought Forth in Love* has been our theme throughout the season of Lent. A promise of our original blessing even as we navigate the ups and downs of the human condition: choices and their consequence, fear and doubt, oppression and liberation. We have been reminded throughout the season, as we remind ourselves today, that the love with which we have been brought forth does not end with our birth, but carries us through in a steadfast, never-failing, never-quitting, always with us, devotion through thick and thin that will never let us go.

If salvation has anything to do with healing—and I believe it does—you could say the love of God saved Mary in that hour of agony. If salvation has anything to do with grace in the midst of panic—and I believe it does—you could say the love of God saved me, her fumbling mumbling minister. If salvation has anything to do with a mother wanting desperately to care for her children—which I believe it does—you could say the parental love of God that suffers right along with us, made known to us through the Christ who has compared himself to a mother hen gathering all of her chicks under her protective wings, is imagining every one of our faces in his mind's eye as makes his way through the agony of this week: What we look like, what we like to eat, what he wants to say to us when he feels so very far removed from us. That he knows what it is like to feel abandoned by a parent who really has never left us but just cannot quite get through to us in the moment.

If salvation has anything do to with healing and grace and parental devotion through thick and thin, we can understand why the apostle Paul, himself will insist that while faith, hope, and love are all important, *the greatest of these is love.*

Which is why we remind our own children every Sunday just how very much God loves them.

And so do we.