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An Act of Love

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“An act of love,” the mysterious character with the auspicious name Carapice Clavicle Moundshroud said to the children before asking, “Is it worth it?”

This is the pinnacle moment in the Emmy award winning screenplay adaptation of Ray Bradbury’s 1972 novel *The Halloween Tree*; what all the adventures and all the tricks and all the treats in that story have brought a group of children to one Halloween night. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Bradbury’s story, *The Halloween Tree* is indeed a treat: it’s a story of a group of children who encounter the mysterious Mr. Moundshroud when their friend, a boy named Pip, failed to show up for their annual Halloween trick or treat frolic. Mr. Moundshroud invited the children to help him search for their friend, an invitation they eagerly accepted, for it was a marvelous adventure Mr. Moundshroud led the children on; one that took them into the past where they witnessed many ancient traditions that can be seen in our modern-day ways of celebrating Halloween.

While at first glance, this appears to be a clever way for Ray Bradbury to explain things like trick-or-treat, dressing up in costumes, haunted houses, pranking, even revelry and parties that are part of our Halloween celebrations today, near the end of the adventure, there was the confrontation with the awful thing that frightened the children more than zombies, ghosts, witches, vampires and monsters: the reason their friend was missing from the festivities. Their friend was ill and dying and that was what they feared most of all: the death of someone they loved.

Facing the possibility of this death made them realize their love for their friend, and so they struck a bargain with the mysterious Mr. Moundshroud: a year of their lives for the life of their friend. A sacrifice. It wasn’t the amount of time that impressed the fictional character in Bradbury’s story. Nor was it the lives themselves. It was the love. The act of love that made the difference, that turned the tide and made the horrors of Halloween melt into the spent smoke of so many extinguished candles that had given jack-o-lanterns light on that dark night. Love extinguished the fear of death, and even the character Moundshroud lost his power.

And so, a story that started as a playful way to explain Halloween was transformed into the best story of all; the one Jesus lived, and the author of Matthew’s Gospel was quite possibly alluding to in the section of the Gospel we just heard. Although we might not see it that way at first.

At first it looks like those persnickety religious leaders are at it again, this time sending a Pharisee who is also religious lawyer to trick Jesus into saying something that will get Jesus in trouble, perhaps testing Jesus to see if he understood the law that meant so much to the people of Jesus' day, for it was out of love for God's people that God first gave those 10 Commandments that the hundreds of religious laws pious Jews followed or attempted to follow were born from. Scholars and historians tell us that it was a common practice of Jesus' day for learned men of the religious laws to discuss and debate the importance of those laws, and it was not necessarily an uncommon question to ask which of the many rules or laws was the most important.

But rather than parse individual rules, Jesus gave an answer that is both a summation of all the laws, and a prayer. It can be said that if you look at the 10 Commandments, they are about love: loving God and loving your neighbor. Therefore, those many rules that developed over time could be summed up the same way. In addition, the words of Jesus about loving God with your whole self and loving your neighbor as yourself is also part of a daily prayer called the Shema that Jewish people still pray. So, perhaps one way of interpreting Jesus' conversation with the religious lawyer in today's Gospel reading is that the lawyer just got slammed, as Jesus may have been saying the lawyer, being a Pharisee, already knew the answer to the question he posed, as he should have been praying the answer daily, and Jesus has had enough trick questions and testing from the religious leaders. That is why he turned and asked the lawyer the question about the Messiah, whose son the Messiah is. Jesus may have wanted to show the lawyer things aren't as simple as giving a text book answer, as that question challenged the lawyer to think more deeply about the answer he gave and challenged the common assumptions that the Messiah was going to be a Davidic like warrior who would restore Israel to political power. Such a Messiah was a figure to be feared, for such a figure would restore that power by means of violence and death, and Jesus may have been using the question to point to a different way to see God and God's dream for God's people.

Remember, the author of Matthew's Gospel wrote the Gospel long after these events had taken place, and the author as well as the community this Gospel was written for, already knew what happened next. They already knew that while it might look like Jesus just slammed the lawyer and won this round, he is going to lose pretty soon. It won't be long before Jesus would be arrested, tried and sentenced to death, and then died a humiliating and excruciating horrific death on a cross. Which might make us wonder why Jesus would talk such smack, if death was something to be avoided, to be feared, shouldn't Jesus have been playing the lawyer's game?

Perhaps the whole point of Matthew's Gospel, indeed all the Gospels, is that death is not the thing to be feared. For we, as did Matthew's community, know the rest of the story, that death was not the end for Jesus. That he rose again. And the Resurrection is not some dark magic act, it was not a horror story that brought back an evil version of Jesus, he was no Halloween zombie. He was alive. And his new life showed death for what it is: the other side of a beginning.

Jesus did not return from the dead with a penchant for vengeance or appetite for bringing suffering to those who had unjustly killed him. Jesus returned as love by forgiving, forgiving those who killed him, and forgiving his own who had abandoned him. It could be said that Jesus' entire life, death, and resurrection is loving God with his whole heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving his neighbors as himself. Jesus' entire life, death, and resurrection is an act of love, love that was willing to sacrifice. That is how God loves not just the people in Jesus' day, that is how God loves each and every one of us today.

This is the love that God may be hoping breaks us free from our fears so that we will love God back, with our whole selves, and love one another, so that God's dream of a world marked by forgiveness, healing, and hope grows more powerful than fears and hunger for things like money and power. This is the love that we can see in our ministries, such as the ministries that are part of the fabric of Church of the Good Shepherd, like the Wednesday free lunch, the knitters group who create beautiful prayer shawls, the volunteers who visit prisoners as part of the KAIROS prison ministry, those who help deliver food to the food pantry. We can also see that love expressed in our newer forms of ministry such as opening the chapel for our neighbors to come in and rest for a few moments, to collect their thoughts, to pray, to just be. These are obvious acts of love.

But these aren't the only acts of love that happen here at Church of the Good Shepherd. It is an act of love to serve on our vestry or as an officer of the church, to represent the parish at Diocesan Convention, to participate in the life of the church, for that is how the work or ministry of the church actually happens and is sustained. It is an act of love to give your time, your money to these ministries and to relief organizations like Episcopal Relief and Development that are working hard in the aftermath of so many recent natural disasters.

As we move forward with our newest ministries of forming a relationship with St. Luke's Episcopal church in Merida, Mexico and starting a coffee shop here in our hall we are reminded in today's Gospel that these ministries need to be more than just something enjoyable for us to do. That both new ministries need to be acts of love, which means both ministries will involve some form of sacrifice; sacrifices that

that might feel like a loss at times, but will really be the beginning of something new. New relationships, new places to invite our neighbors to share what we have, to listen, to be courageous enough to enter into conversations with them. Perhaps to even discover other ways to be present and minister to our neighbors. All of these are acts of love.

So is providing quality end of life care to a loved one, and welcoming the new person into our families, community, and parish. Acts of love are not often easy, or pleasant, or even pain free, but with the love of God we can face even the most painful situation and discover, just as the children in Ray Bradbury's story discovered, worth it.

In the end, Jesus did not walk among us to teach us how to ask argument winning questions, or give jaw-dropping mic drops. His life, death, and resurrection were an act of loving God and loving each other, one that invites us into that same love, so that the same may be said of our parish, and each of us.