

Intention's Grasp: For If You Love

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Lizzie grew up sitting in the west transept of the church, nestled next to her little brother Edward, tucked between her parents Margaret and Ed, and within arm's reach from her grandmother Betty Louis. From that vantage point in the Idlewild sanctuary, Lizzie's perspective on the pulpit was literally through the baptismal font.

In first grade, Lizzie was the strawberry blond child who would race from the transept to sit at the foot of the baptismal font. She would occasionally place her hand on the outstretched hand that reaches from the sculpted font. She would sit wide eyed and obedient as Pastor Steve pulled an infant through the waters of baptism.

After Pastor Steve says, "See what love God has given us that we might be called children of God, and so we are," our congregation welcomes the newest member of the family of faith with the song "Child of Blessing, Child of Promise." Through elementary, middle, and into high school, Lizzie participated in worship from her seat so close to the font. When she became a senior in high school, nurtured in worship and youth ministry, Lizzie stepped into the pulpit to preach what she believed.

At Idlewild, youth ministry emerges out of an intentionally programmed life of worship, education, and mission. The desire is that youth might see God's love and claim that they are children of blessing and promise. Two of the intentional youth ministry programs are a semester-long confirmation ministry for ninth graders and an annual youth led worship. In preparation for preaching on this youth Sunday, high school seniors attend a retreat where they study scripture, pray, play, and exegete the biblical text. This retreat idea emerged when our youth director determined a need for tenacious commitment as "preaching takes some serious work."

At Idlewild's youth Sunday worship service, high school seniors are the preachers and other youth serve as liturgists. One year there might be three preachers who preach six minute sermons and another year, seven preachers who preach three to five minute sermons. The process for preparing to preach has a consistent and intentional framework, yet each year brings the unique creativity and innate imagination of the particular community of youth.

For youth at Idlewild, life lived out in the church is not "sit still and be quiet;" it is "practice and find your voice." Youth ministry is not conditional; it is intentional. It is not "if you go to church, then God will be good to you." It is not "if you read your Bible, then God will answer all your prayers." It is not "if you participate in youth group, then all the kids will be kind to you." Sometimes things break apart – like families and friends. Sometimes scripture does not make sense and prayers are not answered. Sometimes middle schoolers and teenagers are outright mean and terribly unkind to one another, even in the church. Hopefully youth ministry creates a space to ask, "Where is God in all of this life I'm living?" Hopefully youth ministry creates a safe place for youth to practice their faith, ask hard questions of scripture, and develop healthy relationships.

Lizzie and I bear the same last name, but we are not related. We grew to know one another in the confirmation ministry, through her writings about people of faith,

on a youth mission trip to El Salvador, and as we worked together preparing for Youth Sunday. I learned life was good but not always kind to Lizzie through high school, and sometimes genuine friends weren't always easy to find. In the church she could close her eyes, cross the threshold into the sanctuary, place her hand on the porous wall, and move to find that place where her faith is most powerfully formed. Idlewild's prayer is that through God's power and intention's grasp, youth will trust the depth of God's love and hear a call to serve in ministries of justice and peace.

Lizzie's navigation into a particular place of formation in the house of the Lord is also evidenced in Lizzie's sermon writing. Lizzie's senior year Youth Ministry took seven seniors away for a Friday night retreat at the water's edge, the same location where they had gone three years before for a Confirmation Retreat to consider Christ's question to the disciples after he'd washed their feet: "Do you know what I have done to you?"

The preaching retreat began by relinquishing all forms of technology. The seniors remembered the specificity of place and held the memories formed over time through the church. The seniors checked in with one another asking, "How is it with your life? What are you anxious about? What's going on that's really good?" After checking in, they shared a meal. Afterwards the seniors moved to a different space and answered the question "If you had to describe to someone your understanding of who God is, how would you do that?" They listened intently with one another, laughed, and sometimes questioned. Their accountability with one another was born in lasting relationships formed in the church and the gift of the resilience of youth. After checking in, the leaders of the retreat explored the role of a preacher in proclaiming the Good News and the function of a sermon in the Order of Reformed Worship.

With the stage set and the commitment made to be preachers for a Lord's Day, the seniors practiced *Lectio Divina* on the designated lectionary passage. All seniors preach from the same text. The practice of *Lectio Divina* surfaces a word or a phrase that resonates from within each person. With clipboards and pens handed out, the senior preachers are asked to write their word or phrase on a tablet. The seniors then identify a gesture that goes with their word or phrase. Having practiced the prayer discipline with scripture, written the word or phrase, the senior preachers move to memorize the scripture and set it to movement with simple gestures. The simple gestures are woven together, and the biblical text channels itself into the soul of each preacher.

After a break the senior preachers are sent off to begin the craft of sermon writing. A time boundary is set for writing, and a designated time is set to come back into a group and practice reading before the group. In the writing time, the senior preachers are invited to take their word or phrase from scripture and to allow their imaginations to be unleashed. They are encouraged to reflect through stories, memories, or feelings about their particular word or passage. When the senior preachers come together, they read what they have and invite feedback.

At the first reading, Lizzie came with obvious Ginsbergian influence. Mystical musings on being alive to Christ's love punctuated her sermon in these strands of seemingly disconnected, yet intimately linked words. In twelve years of preparing for Youth Sunday and in listening to first drafts, I'd never heard quite a piece. Her reading was stunning, and she felt it not enough, turning her eyes down. Her peers and the adults in the room sat for a moment in the sound of sheer silence, awed as

we'd listened with a Jacob-like preacher who was alive to love. Those words she'd heard time and time again from her vantage point at the foot of the baptismal font, "See what love," came not only back to us, but also became abundantly clear. Not only was Lizzie enough, but the words she'd formed from the Word were enough. In original form, her words follow in her sermon from Matthew 5:46. "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"

For If You Love

We have heard it said that active love is a harsh and fearful thing compared with the love in dreams. Love in dreams wants easy things, wants a soft reaching eagerness, and above all wants to be watched. This kind of love we all carry.

But there is different love, and love to labor for. Uncomfortable love— love to be borrowed from. Love for the people in each of our corners of the universe not transcended by idea or by the dream to be kind. Love for the human places raking broken past us. Conscious, opened love, broad endless person stuffed of all pain and all good. Compassion for the crooked suffering broken things. Compassion in the ragged relationship between unlocked souls, compassion after the misdeeds, and compassion keeping with even our closest guilt.

I want this love, want it not for my good, but despite all fault. I want to be known from that secret, fragile core of me. And with it then, I want to know the world strung out around. I want questions, I want reality, I want God— and I do not want comfort. I want the voice of my own soul, its ghosts and blushes, all the fumbling spirit and kneeled down prayers. I want to cross that threshold like salt, weary, wind-roasted, whole to taste. I want to labor into loving the hard things and people around.

Carried through these lives we have are a thousand faces in transit. And each one comes to us offering a chance at that vast consciousness of understanding. My hope for this day is to find good love, to be vigilant with it.

I want to see the present beauty and to hold what has been given, to love in action and to turn from spite, especially when that anger wants us. Especially when we are tired and the roots are dry. Especially when God feels far and the soul grows deep and crooked.

The word is if, the word is for if you love. This is the choice, the going onward and outward in conscious love not only for humanity but for the humans in each of our corners. For the tiresome friends and those begging time from us. For the ones who are hard to love. Slow-speaking, gum-smacking, pen-clicking human real surrounding instruments of holy inherent good.

And so God offers a new world, saying, "For If You Love! For if you love, such self-altering things will come." And this is a promise.

We are here, here a human solid place to be active in love. A place I have been actively loved. And for that I am thankful. And from that we are grown of an early consciousness, steady- muddied-endless wading in our knowledge, wrestling all the night with God. And from that we are alive to love.