

Sermon for Easter Day, 2014
The Rev. Matthew R. Dutton-Gillett

Trinity Church in Menlo Park, California
An Episcopal Community

This past Tuesday, like every Tuesday in Holy Week, many of the clergy in our diocese gathered with our bishop at Grace Cathedral for the annual service in which we renew our vows as ordained priests and deacons, and in which the bishop blesses the Oil of Chrism for the year — the oil that will be used in every congregation between now and next Holy Tuesday to anoint the newly baptized.

In his homily this past Tuesday, Bishop Marc referenced an essay that appeared in last Sunday's *New York Times* by Leslie Jamison. It was about a tattoo that she received on her arm in the wake of the disintegration of a relationship she had shared for four years. The tattoo is a quotation from Terence, an ancient Roman playwright. She had it inscribed on her arm in the original Latin; translated, it means, "I am human: and nothing human is alien to me."

The reactions she received to this tattoo, as people asked her to translate it, were remarkable. A clerk in a drugstore where Jamison bought the supplies she needed to care for her new tattoo wanted to know what it meant. Upon receiving the translation, the woman looked at Jamison for a long time and then finally said, "I think there is so much evil in this world, and so much good."

Another clerk in another store sometime later — a large, imposing man — grasped her arm and asked her for the tattoo's translation. Upon hearing it, he shook his head and said, "There are people going through things in this world that are really bad. Do you understand that?" He went on to say, "You tried to give me something. But I blocked it. I blocked what you were giving me."

Her father wrote to her from the Rwanda Genocide Memorial, asking, “D[o] [you] really believe what [your] tattoo [says], even about perpetrators of genocide?” Later, on a first date with someone, she was asked whether her tattoo could even apply to evil?

And this is what seems to have tripped up so many people about her tattoo: the suggestion that she could so radically declare herself to be in solidarity with humanity, a solidarity so complete that *nothing* human — even what is worst in humanity — could be excluded from it.

Leslie Jamison acknowledges that her tattoo does not describe where she actually is in her life; rather, it is more of a declaration of what she aspires to. She sees herself, I think, on a journey of becoming, and the tattoo describes something of the shape of what she hopes to become: a person capable of living in a deep, radical solidarity with the human family that leaves no one and no human thing disconnected from her life.

She did try to explain this to that second store clerk she encountered, and he understood immediately one of the implications of this aspiration: “You will leave a little piece of yourself with everyone.... You will get exhausted trying to give yourself away.” That clerk understood that to live in such deep solidarity with others involves a radical giving away of one’s self: a giving away of the ego’s desire to cling to a rigid understanding of self and of the world; a giving away of judging others in ways that create categories of exclusion; a giving away of that sense that we often have that another’s suffering, or another’s evil, or even another’s goodness, has little or nothing to do with us — it’s the way we insulate ourselves from the world and its difficulties.

The clerk imagined this solidarity, this giving away of self, to be exhausting. And I suspect we would be tempted to agree. It certainly sounds exhausting to me. But what the clerk is describing — what Leslie Jamison with her tattoo is aspiring toward — is the shape of what lives look like in the light of the Resurrection. A Risen Life is a life that is not exhausted by this self-giving solidarity with the human family, but is a life that is empowered, enlightened, enlarged, and — indeed — *inexhaustible*.

It's hard for us to put ourselves in the place of those first disciples of Jesus, to imagine what it must have been like to eat with him, travel with him, listen to his teaching, witness his life day after day. The stories of the gospels give us just a taste, and I suspect barely scratch the surface of what the experience of Jesus must have been like. Yet, what the gospels do describe is a Jesus who himself would, I think, have been absolutely comfortable sporting Leslie Jamison's tattoo: "I am human: and nothing human is alien to me." Except that for Jesus, the tattoo would not have been aspirational, expressing a hope for how his life might be. Instead, it would have described exactly the shape of the life of Christ.

Because Jesus was always giving himself away to be in solidarity with those whose humanity felt somewhat alien to the "respectable" people of Jesus' time. He took the good news of God's inclusive love to sick people, particularly those who suffered from skin diseases, physical disabilities, or mental illnesses that turned them into outcasts among their own communities. He spent time among women who were so desperately poor and desolate that they sold their bodies to others — incurring the condemnation of a society that refused to help them. He befriended tax collectors — no more popular in his time than in ours; people who were seen as betraying their own people to collect taxes for Roman occupiers. And yet, in placing himself in

solidarity with these almost alien sorts of humans, Jesus did not cut himself off from the more “respectable” people of his society. He spent time also among the privileged and secure, inviting them to join him on this path described by those words, “I am human: and nothing human is alien to me.”

Given the shape of Jesus’ life 2,000 years ago, we might ask ourselves what that life would look like translated to our own time and place. I suspect Jesus would be spending time in homeless shelters and among the homeless on the streets; with immigrants and the undocumented; with those in prison and in hospital; among addicts and alcoholics. Among victims of violence and prejudice. In zones of war and of poverty. And this list probably barely scratches the surface. But Jesus would not, I think, be only in those kinds of places. He would also be walking the corridors of power in Washington, Sacramento, and every other place where the powerful gather. He would walk the streets of Atherton, Menlo Park, and Palo Alto just as surely as he would be walking the streets in the Tenderloin. He would be with us in our churches just as he would be with those who won’t go near a church. And just as he would be among those gathered in mosques or synagogues or other places of worship. Because Jesus doesn’t choose between people. He doesn’t love any one group more than another — and if he seems to, it’s only because we see him loving people whom we are not accustomed to loving. For Jesus, nothing human is alien. Everything about us — including the stuff that we think is shameful and evil — unfolds within the love, grace, and concern of God.

We will be forgiven, I think, for finding this hard to believe. The disciples, who enjoyed all that time hanging out with Jesus, found it hard to believe, as well. As Jesus went on giving himself so completely in solidarity with others, the disciples became increasingly alarmed. Because Jesus began to tell them just how far he was willing to go: that he was willing to allow himself to

be killed, an act of solidarity with all victims everywhere, but also — in its own, mysterious way — an act of solidarity with those who needed to kill him and make him their victim. He was willing to give away even his life, so that even the human experience of injustice and, ultimately, death would not be alien to him. This seemed to the disciples to be going too far — and when they finally beheld the dead body of Jesus, being taken down from the cross, they assumed that they were right: that Jesus had gone too far, and given himself to the point of exhaustion, of exhausting his own life.

And so it was that they were taken so utterly, so completely by surprise when they encountered Christ as the Risen One. As if to place an exclamation point on the final sentence of his earthly life, the Risen Christ appeared first to some of the women among his followers — people who, as women, were considered just a bit alien. They who were made the first witnesses of his Resurrection were people who were not allowed in their time to give legal testimony as witnesses — they were considered unreliable. And to these Unreliable Ones did the Risen One come, not exhausted as the disciples had assumed, but rather filled with inexhaustible life. Jesus became the One who had given himself away so completely, had placed himself in solidarity with the human family so totally, that he found himself not exhausted but energized, not dead but alive, not disempowered but fully empowered to be the light of the world.

In the light of the Resurrection, we can finally understand the full scope of the project that God was undertaking in Jesus. For in the human Jesus, the divine God is to be found, and through the human Jesus, the divine God touches every aspect of human life to declare that nothing human is alien to God. We have not always been faithful to this story. Too often, we have supposed that God is only interested in touching pure, righteous souls. We have imagined that the less noble parts of the human experience are alien to God, and that those who are too

caught up in what we consider to be the smellier, dirtier aspects of the human are somehow cut off from God. Perhaps Easter is a good time to rededicate ourselves to the scandalous story of a God who comes to us in a human being to embrace everything about us, to give himself away to us so completely, and to emerge on the other side of that self-giving not as the exhausted one, but as the One who can never be exhausted.

If we can be faithful in telling this story about God and Jesus, then we can be more faithful in telling our own story in the light of the Risen Christ: because the store clerk who told Leslie Jamison that, by giving herself away as boldly as her tattoo proclaimed, she would exhaust herself, was wrong. Because the stories of our own self-giving are not about depleting and exhausting ourselves. Rather, they are stories of becoming more and more alive.

I hope we have not gathered here this morning to remember a mystery that happened once upon a time, one from which we may draw hope or inspiration but which ultimately seems strangely alien to our own experience. I hope we have gathered here to renew, or perhaps make for the first time, a commitment to embracing everything that the Risen Christ invites us to embrace: the truth of a God who loved the world so much that God embraced everything and everyone in it, to whom no one and nothing was alien; the truth of a Christ whose life invites us into the dynamic of Resurrection, where giving ourselves away in solidarity with the whole human family leads us to be more alive than we ever thought possible, held in the grasp of a God who will never let us go, no matter what.

When I started this morning, I mentioned that part of the ritual of the clergy gathering with the bishop on Holy Tuesday is the blessing of the Oil of Chrism used at baptism. When someone is baptized, a priest uses that oil to make a sign of the cross on the person's forehead. I think this

year, when we use that oil, I will be thinking of that anointing as a kind of tattoo, one that says,
“Like Christ, I am human: and nothing human is alien to me, or to Christ, or to God.”