

True Love Will Find You In The End

Malachi 3; Phil 1; Luke 1:68-79; 3:1-16

A sermon preached by Zac Koons on December 5, 2021 at St. Mark's, Austin

On June 19th in the year two thousand twenty-one B.D.—that is, Before Delta—I got to attend the first ever Austin FC home match. Cases were at an all-time low, and the CDC had just told us that it was safe to be unmasked in public if we were vaccinated. I couldn't wait, but I would be lying if I didn't say I wasn't also pretty anxious. I hadn't been in a group of 20 unmasked people, much less a group of 20,000. I really wanted to have fun; I desperately wanted to have an embodied experience community again, but I really didn't want to be doing something stupid that would endanger myself or my family.

My tickets are in the supporters section, which is the section behind the goal where there are no seats to sit on, only rails to hold as you are required to stand for the entire game—and not only stand, you are expected to sing with enthusiasm and without interruption for the whole 90 minutes.

Moments before kickoff, Matthew McConaughey emerged from the tunnel in a green suit, with a bongo-in-tow, to lead the Listos Verde chant before kickoff, and I have to tell you, from the first beat of his drum all my covid-anxiety melted away completely. I can't tell you what a joy it was to be an anonymous one in a sea of thousands, surrounded by strangers but united in common humanity by our pure and uncomplicated love for the Verde & Black, singing our hearts out together in songs we were learning right then for the first time. It felt like someone took all the covid-era utterances of the “we're in this together” slogan and packaged them up and gave them to me in the gift of this evening. There *was* community on the other side of isolation. There *are* sources of common cause that can unite strangers across seas of difference for moments of common, beautiful humanity.

That the game ended in a 0-0 draw took nothing away from the magic of the experience. In fact, the most memorable moment of the entire evening took place after the final whistle. It is longstanding tradition in soccer for the players from the home team to visit and thank the supporters section at the end of the match, no matter the result. The supporters in turn traditionally hold their team scarves in the air and sing one final song. I was not emotionally prepared for the song the Austin FC supporters section leaders chose for this moment of this and every match.

We sang a song by the 1980's Austin folk legend and graphic artist Daniel Johnston, perhaps better know to you as the designer of the “Hi, How Are You?” alien mural still painted on the side of a building on Guadalupe, subsequently seen on t-shirts and shot glasses at every Austin tourist trap. Here's how the song goes:

*True love will find you in the end.
You'll find out just whose your friend.
Don't be sad, I know you will;
Don't give up until
True love will find you in the end*

I had never heard this song before. As soon as the lyrics registered, I just started weeping.

You can see why they chose this song for this moment. It's a simple way for the fans to say to the players, especially after a loss—of which, for us, there were many—to say, our fandom is not conditional on your winning or losing. We're your friends no matters what. It's a way of saying, it's ok to be sad now. But don't give up. Try again next time.

But I was weeping because I heard in those words something so much more than the unconditional nature of our fandom. So much more than try again next time. We had all—all 20,000 of us in that stadium—had just lived through over a year of collective trauma and loneliness, and we just had this beautiful experience of togetherness and harmony and here at the very end we weren't just saying "we're in this together" but we were also saying "everything is going to be ok." I wanted so desperately to believe that everything was going to be ok. That true love would find us in the end. And man did that feel good.

And yet, I heard in those words deeper resonances still.

I like to think I was weeping because, well, I am a Christian. And I can't hear words like "true love will find you in the end" and not think about Jesus. When I hear those words, I hear St. Paul talking about the end of the world, saying "The [God] who began a good work among you will bring it to its completion by the day of Jesus Christ." I hear the words of the prophet Malachi, "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple." I hear Luke describing the last day as a time when the Lord will return "to set his people free;" when "every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." There aren't many better phrases I can think of to succinctly summarize the Christian view of the end of the world than those words: True love will find you in the end. What a perfect Advent song.

When I heard the words "Don't be sad; I know you will," I couldn't not think about all the people who I know who are struggling. Not just all the people in this stadium who have been struggling and lonely in a covid world. But all those outside it. All those carrying secret traumas inside our collective one. All those too busy fighting cancer to worry much about a virus. All those marriages now on the rocks. All those addictions we thought were defeated flaring back up. I couldn't not think about all the people I know who are lost and confused and sick and suffering. I couldn't hear those words and not think about you. Don't give up until, true love will find you in the end.

The words are even more poignant when you learn more about Daniel Johnston himself. suffered from bi-polar disorder and spent several extended periods of his life in psychiatric institutions. Once, while flying in a 2-seater prop plane with his father, he suffered a manic delusional episode during which he wrested his father's hands from the cockpit, removed the key from the ignition, and threw the keys out the plane window. Both he and his father survived the crash landing. And yet he was a prolific artistic savant—in music, poetry, film, drawing, and painting. His songs have been covered by Pearl Jam, Wilco, Beck, Tom Waits, Death Cab, The Flaming Lips and many others.

And actually, as I learned about Daniel Johnston, I discovered that the song has a second verse.

*This is a promise with a catch.
Only if you're looking, can it find you.
True love is searching too.
How can it recognize you
Unless you step out into the light, the light.*

You may have noticed that Malachi adds a qualification when speaking about the coming of the Lord on the last day. He warns, "But who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. . . he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness." Luke adds his own warning: "The dawn from on high shall break upon us to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

What Malachi, Luke, and Daniel Johnston's second verse are all saying is this: True love finding you may not feel entirely comfortable. The second Advent of Christ may not be all care-bear roses and sunshine, the principle reason being is that it's possible that some of the wrongs that Jesus returns to set right might actually exist in your own heart; in your own life.

That's the thing about true love. True love requires that you be honest. That you be vulnerable. That you not leave parts of yourself behind. That you step into the light. True love accepts you as you are, but does not leave you that way. True love requires that you open your full self to be changed, to be refined and purified like silver and gold. True love requires forgiveness. True love is hard. And is often uncomfortable.

But true love also makes you feel more alive than anything else in the world. There's nothing that can bring more joy.

What I'm saying is that's the kind of love offered to us in Christ. And that's the kind of love that is going to show up at the end of the world.

When Christ returns, he is not going to cover all of what's bad in the world with a giant blanket of good and call that sufficient. When Christ returns, valleys will be made full, mountains will be made low, impurities will be refined away. God won't cover over but instead will transform what is bad into something good. The second coming of Christ will be comprehensive and cosmic, but it will also be deeply personal. Everything bad in me, everything bad in you, will be transformed so that on the day of Christ you will be holy and blameless before God.

Actually, Daniel Johnston provides another picture for us. When he first arrived in Austin in the mid-80s, he got a job at McDonalds and otherwise walked around town handing out copies of his album on cassette. The only problem was, for a time he didn't have a way to make dubbed copies of his album, so he would have to go back home and re-record the album from the beginning and re-draw the cover art for every cassette he handed out. The song of redemption is the same for all of us, but the details are unique to every individual.

God in Christ is true love searching for you. I wonder whether or not you have a sense that you're being hunted. The question this morning is whether or not you will allow yourself to be found.

In the very end there's an important difference between Christian conviction and Daniel Johnston's second verse. In the very end, it doesn't matter whether you're looking or not. Whether you have consciously stepped into the light or not. In the very end, there is nowhere you will be able to hide from God. God will continue to search every height, breadth, width, and depth until God finds you. Whether you like it or not, true love will find you in the end.

(With the choir)

True love will find you in the end.

You'll find out just whose your friend.

Don't be sad, I know you will;

Don't give up until

True love will find you in the end

Amen.