

Proper 17, Year A 2026

Exodus 3:1-15

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

You may have noticed that we've hosted a number of baptisms of late. Many of our recent baptismal candidates have been infants, children too young to comprehend much less commit to a life in this community. In receiving these babies into our lives, we've repeated our own baptismal promises and vowed to support these children. We've pledged to BE that proverbial village required to nurture every life, to be that place and people seeking to grow and mature into relationship with God in and through relationship with God's creation.

It has fallen to us to be the grownups in the room, so to speak. It's our vocation, our call to be responsible, to be adults worthy of the trust placed in us by God and expected of us by the parents and godparents who entrust these children to us. Our gospel and epistle readings leave little doubt about those expectations.

Let love be genuine.

Paul's not describing a behavior — he's describing a context. Not something WE do but what GOD does whenever and wherever we let LOVE BE all that God wills it to be. Genuine love expresses what it means to “offer our bodies as a living sacrifice.”

Let love be authentic.

Authentic love requires us to live alongside and engage with others in a full-bodied way. In the fully human way love came to us in Jesus, and comes to us in and through the Spirit that abides with us still.

Genuine love, authentic love — engages with others in practical and physical ways. Easier said than done when technology and social media offer virtual relationships, fast and fleeting digital connections that often complicate comprehension and exacerbate disagreement.

That provoke defensive dodging, avoiding the difficult and even dangerous conversations required to nurture human life. An online culture wherein we're losing precious moments of our lives in impersonal, disengaged arguments and anxieties that pull us away from those actually in the room with us. Dying bit by bit, faster and faster, losing our lives wantonly, with little gain.

Genuine love, authentic life requires personal engagement. That's my cross, your cross, our cross. This is the cross of discipleship each of us is called to take up and bear — the costly sacrificial burden of our age, our time and culture. The risk in every conversation — the very real possibility, the high probability that in every sincere, genuine exchange of two honest human beings bringing their whole selves, their souls and bodies, into communion with one another each will lose something, and each will gain something, and all will be changed. How much of my true self do I show, much less share, with another? What do I risk? And at what cost?

Elizabeth Palmer, Senior Editor of *The Christian Century*, remarks in the current issue that "When I look at my neighbors who view the world's problems very differently than I do, I really struggle to see their goodness. I know in theory that they bear the grace and beauty of the God in whose image they were created, but something prevents me from believing it or acting on it."¹

At least one obstacle she identifies is reliance upon our intellect, our cultivation and stewardship of knowledge in a world awash in information and awed by Artificial Intelligence. Our contemporary crisis of faith. A crisis of trust eroded by unfettered and unfiltered data with little reliable face value. A crisis of confidence based in a tendency to self-exaltation verging on full-scale idolatry, a self-confidence based in our own rightness, egocentric self-righteousness. How much do I truly know of myself? What can I truly know of another?

¹ Elizabeth Palmer, *The Christian Century*, September 2026, pp.52-55.

Ms. Palmer suggests that an adult faith, a mature trust in God, is “given to us through the work of the Holy Spirit and nurtured through the grace we [seek and] continually receive—in word and sacrament [shared in this context], ... but also in our daily lives in ...reaching out to our neighbors from a stance of vulnerability, openness, and kindness. Vulnerability is frightening, [she admits] because it asks us to give up certainty. But [she offers] there can be real freedom in letting go of the illusion that we have all the answers.”

The central figure of novelist Elizabeth Strout’s latest book, *The Things We Never Say*², is a character on such a journey “of internal reckoning.” Artie Dam is a “57-year-old high school history teacher...[who] presents a kind, jovial exterior to the world, deliberately masking his deep-seated anxiety and a feeling of otherness. ... [Artie possesses an] instinctive empathy for others’ suffering ... evident in his protective actions toward vulnerable students ... and in his capacity to see the humanity in [the troubled ones]. ...His profession as a history teacher is central to his identity, allowing him to contextualize the present and provide moral guidance to his students, a role he cherishes as his true “occupation,” [his] life’s purpose” — his vocation.

“Artie’s working-class background creates a subtle but constant friction in his [personal] life.... [His marriage to] Evie, [gave him access to] a more affluent social class [within which Artie] does not feel as though he belongs.... Despite living in Evie’s inherited seaside home for decades, he never fully sheds the feeling of being an outsider.”³

Strout’s writing doesn’t shy away from hard realities and this novel is remarkable for being set in the politically-charged summer and autumn of 2024, making it a timely reflection of the complex context of our lives and culture today. As I pondered this morning’s portions from

² Elizabeth Strout, Random House (New York, 2026)

³ <https://www.supersummary.com/the-things-we-never-say/summary/> [accessed 8.24.2026]

Romans and Matthew I realized the issues of human life embedded within them are little different from those navigated by Artie and Evie.

Let love be authentic. Genuine love, authentic love is the essential quality in human integrity—an authentic appreciation of oneself as a unique creature within a multitude of singular creatures. The love that can only be cultivated by the dedicated stewardship and care of communities that nurture a seasoned and experienced, chastened and formed adult child of God.

But where are those spaces and places and faces committed to cultivating genuine love? The consequences of isolation and captivity in pandemic are still evident in the tentative navigation of a treacherous social landscape. Artie and Evie attempt to maintain their lives and relationships in their New England community on Massachusetts Bay. After a social gathering of friends and colleagues Artie recalls that “when they came home he had said [to Evie] something like "Why don't people ever say anything real?"

And now he knew why. Because to say anything real was to say things that nobody wanted to know. Or if they wanted to know, they would not care in the right way. Or even understand.

It was a private thing, to be alive. He understood this now. ...

As he walked slowly up to the bedroom, he thought that now, after all these years, he was finally becoming a grownup. What did he mean by that? That he was finally beginning to understand the multitudinous aspect of people. He was amazed by it, really, now that he thought about it. In his study of history, he had learned about the leaders, and the various groups involved, but he had somehow missed this fact about every single person: that they held within themselves a vast, unknowable universe.

And he understood that it could make a person lonely; people had to take and give to one another whatever they could. If it was not enough... Well, then it meant one just had to be a grownup.⁴

Is this church a space in which people may become what God has made them to be, to know they're God's sons and daughters, a place where they and we can see God, God's creation, and ourselves growing towards restored relation to God? Is this a place where love can be genuine? Are we a people who can say the real things, bear the real burdens and the true blessings of authenticity?

I return to the ritual words of Baptism that of late we repeat nearly monthly. Will we be responsible for seeing that all entrusted to us are nurtured in Christian faith and life? Will we by our prayers and witness help every child of God of every age to grow into the full stature of Christ? Whenever and wherever we are gathered in God's name, will God's presence be evident in and through us? Pray, sisters and brothers, that God help us.

Amen.

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⁴ Elizabeth Strout, *The Things We Never Say*, Random House (New York, 2026) pp. 182-186