

A Love Supreme: God's Desire for Healing, Wholeness, and Wellbeing
Sermon for St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul, MN
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Sunday, May 26, 2019 – [The Sixth Sunday of Easter](#)

In the Name of God: A Love Supreme. Amen.

Today's Gospel Lesson prompted me to consider these three questions:

- What prevents us from the healing, wholeness, and well-being we desire?
- How are we actively participating in our own woundedness; and how are we actively participating in our own healing process?
- Why is the difficult practice of being well essential to following Jesus?

We will explore these questions together this morning and continue discussing them this Wednesday evening at our final "Unpack the Sermon" Supper. We will also engage today's Gospel by exploring the story behind one of the greatest jazz albums of all time – John Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme' – trusting that we too might hear the healing music of God's call deep within us; stand up, take our mats, and walk into the abundant life that God desires for all people and all Creation.

But first, a personal account of the horrors, struggles, and unholy mysteries of Dating Apps. As many of you know, your 37-year-old Associate Rector is very single. I'm bald, bespectacled, brown, foreign, a priest, old-souled (I'm 193 in soul years), and as I approach 40, the buttons on my cassock can attest that my body is

becoming rather chunky. I'm attaining what is called "Dad Bod." So the struggle of finding a significant other is real. For those of you fortunate enough to be married or partnered, count yourself lucky that you do not have to endure the slings and arrows of outrageous Dating Apps.

For those who are not in the know, there are a variety of online dating applications available. You can create a dating profile with photographs, an introductory narrative, answer a slew of questions, and describe the sort of relationship you are seeking. You then enter what I can only describe as a wild safari of catfish, ghosts, and all kinds of human absurdity. Why would we single folks go on this absurd safari? Well, for reasons too numerous to unpack right now, meeting someone in the traditional ways – through friends or family, at church, or in the poetry aisle of a bookshop – are bygone ways of finding romantic connection that evade many single folks today. Hence the need for Dating Apps. A recent article in *The Atlantic* magazine¹ laid bare the sad truth about Dating Apps. The writer states that unless you are exceptionally good-looking, the thing online dating may be best at is sucking up large amounts of time. Average users logged in 11 times a day, for a total of about an hour and a half a day, and they didn't get much in return. The overwhelming majority of matches don't lead to so much as a

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/the-sex-recession/573949/>

two-way text exchange, much less a date. Now, some of you may have Dating App success stories, but in my dismal experience, I liken Dating Apps to 99c fast food – it’s fast, cheap, and pushes the fat, salt, and sugar pleasure buttons, but half an hour later you’re left feeling unnourished, regretful, and slightly ill. Dating Apps for me get in the way of finding the deep connection I seek; the real, nutritious, wholesome, delicious nourishment of authentic relationship that I truly desire is simply not being served.

What on earth do my struggles with Dating Apps have to do with today’s Gospel? When I thought about the utter fruitlessness of spending hours, days, weeks, months, years on Dating Apps which consistently leave me bamboozled, ignored, insulted, discarded, and unloved, I immediately saw myself in the man in today’s Gospel. Among the blind, lame, and paralyzed who lay in the porticos near the healing pool, “One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.” For thirty-eight years he lay right by the healing pool. For thirty-eight years this man was waiting for someone to put him into the pool because, as he says to Jesus, “while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.”

What is it that steps ahead of us and gets in the way of healing, wholeness, and well-being? I realized that the hours I waste on a Dating App waiting for

replies from people who are clearly not interested in me, is precious time I could invest in those who *are* genuinely interested in connection. I could spend that time cultivating friendships that are real and not virtual. So, I pose this question to each of you: what is it that gets in the way of your wellbeing? I want to be sure you don't misunderstand me. We are not discussing being made well in the sense of finding "a cure" through medical science. I am speaking of spiritual wellness; of our interconnected mind-body-spirit being fully alive. When we waste countless hours staring into screens seeking relationship that is not there; when we keep saying yes to more food, more drink, more sex, more work, more television, when we know we've had enough; when we buy more things we don't need; when we gorge ourselves on the cynicism, apathy, and disgust in the media, we allow all of these spirit-crushing idols to come between us and the healing pool of wellbeing, and we become estranged from ourselves, each other, Creation, and God.

In this my 38th year, contemplating the man who had been longing for 38 years to be healed, I discovered that John Coltrane's album 'A Love Supreme' was recorded in December 1964 when Coltrane himself was 38 years old. With 'A Love Supreme' he not only overcame his long struggle with addictions to heroine and

alcohol but created what many consider to be the greatest jazz album of all time.²

As described on NPR's *All Things Considered*, John Coltrane presented 'A Love Supreme' as a spiritual declaration that his musical devotion was intertwined with his faith in God. The album mirrors Coltrane's spiritual quest that grew out of his personal troubles, including a long struggle with drug and alcohol addiction."³

Reflecting on how John Coltrane's story connects with today's Gospel, I now see the idea of healing in a new way. Sometimes we try to medicate spiritual wounds with toxic behaviors, toxic excuses, or toxic substances that temporarily numb our pain. Eventually those toxic decisions destroy our relationships and kill us. In his essay titled, "John Coltrane, the power of 'a love supreme' and the call to radical discipleship," theologian and pastor Paul Robeson Ford writes,

What Coltrane recognized foremost of all was the mercy of God that created the opportunity for us to be defined not by our most significant shortcomings or darkest moments (whether they be fleeting or long-lasting), but instead by our capacity to persevere *through* those challenges in order to fully manifest our gifts and potential. A "love supreme" truly was the most appropriate title for Coltrane's album because it articulates in succinct terms what defines a meaningful life for us as Christians.⁴

² Ashley Kahn, *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane's Signature Album*, Foreword by Elvin Jones, (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2003), 15.

³ <https://www.npr.org/2000/10/23/148148986/a-love-supreme>

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<https://baptistnews.com/article/john-coltrane-the-power-of-a-love-supreme-and-the-call-to-radical-discipleship/#.XOLgRfZFzIW>

In today's Gospel we read, "When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, Jesus said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'" Again, this Gospel passage has nothing to do with the cures of medical science. This is Jesus's sacred invitation to get out of our own way; to trust in the mercy of God; to trust in the incarnate God who is with us in our struggles and who is calling us to participate in the healing and resilience freely given to us by God's Grace.

Coltrane's answer to Jesus's question, "Do you want to be made well?" was a profoundly genuine "Yes, Lord." Alice Coltrane, John's widow recalled that in 1964 after seven years of battling his addictions Coltrane secluded himself for five days in the upper room of their home with pen, paper, and saxophone. She said, "John would go up there, take little portions of food every now and then, spending his time **pondering over the music he heard within himself.**" When he finally reappeared, she noticed that Coltrane, normally deep in thought, was unusually serene. She said, "**It was like Moses coming down from the mountain, it was so beautiful. He walked down and there was that joy, that peace in his face, tranquility.**"⁵

⁵ *Ibid.*, xv.

Participating in our own healing, wholeness, and wellbeing is a life-long journey that requires patience, grace, and courage to continually stand up, take our mats, and walk in Love as Christ loves us, whether we feel like it or not. John Coltrane began his journey of recovery when his unmanageable addictions got him fired by Miles Davis in 1957. It took seven years for Coltrane to rid himself of the idol of his addictions through the discipline and practice of loving himself back into right relationship with God, his neighbors, and himself. Through that work of A Love Supreme he could finally stand up, take his mat, and walk into his healing, wholeness, and wellbeing one breath and one phrase of sublime music at a time.

By nourishing our minds, bodies, and spirits with good things, with rest and recreation every day; by being involved in life-giving relationships; by doing work that is steeped in our God-given gifts and purpose; like John Coltrane we can do the hard work of loving ourselves back to the abundant life God desires for us. By ridding ourselves of the idols that get in the way of being fully alive, we too, can choose to make God – Who is Love Supreme – our Ultimate Concern and be free.

I close with the Trinitarian benediction which ends the poem that John Coltrane composed for the original liner notes of his album, 'A Love Supreme.'

**God breathes through us so completely...
so gently we hardly feel it... yet,
it is our everything.**

**Thank you God.
ELATION – ELEGANCE – EXALTATION –
All from God. Thank you, God. Amen.⁶**

⁶ John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme*, liner notes, (Universal City, CA: Verve Music Group, 2003), 14.