

When My Strength Faileth

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, o

Lord o God of Truth,

Amen

Prologue

It is such an honor to be here this morning/evening. My name is William Compton: I'm a junior at East High just down the street and a member of the youth group here at St James. It really is a huge honor to be here in front of you, but also, it's an honor just to speaking in this room.

I don't think that there has ever been a more hallowed ground in my life. Schools came and went as I grew from elementary school to middle school to high school. Houses came and went. But despite that, I returned to this room week after week. I was baptized in this room, confirmed in this room. I discovered a love for singing in this room and have been able to share music in this space for most of my life. And I haven't just performed music in this space. For years I performed the Passion Play here with the youth group. One year I even got to play Jesus. I knelt on those stones and imagined the room to be the Garden of Gethsemane as I asked God to lift the burden of death from my shoulders.

I still remember being so little that standing in the pews I couldn't see over the row of hymnals in front of me. So I would hop up onto the seat: get on eye level with my parents. I don't know if anyone ever discouraged that, but I'm sure that little William, complete with sweet, strawberry blond curls, couldn't help himself. I might have been a nervous kid, but I was also such a curious kid: I never would have been able to last an entire service without really knowing what was going on.

But, in the words of Fleetwood Mac, “time makes you bolder, even children get older, and I’m getting older too.” All of a sudden those strawberry blond curls turned into the nearly untameable mane that you see here today. You hear a lot about what to expect from getting older whether they’re warning you about peer pressure or body odor, but one thing that no one ever told me about is how complicated it can be when you really start to realize what you value in this life.

You would think that knowing--or beginning to know--the guiding principles for how you want to live would make everything simpler, but somehow it doesn’t.

When I was little, my parents would fetch me from the nursery every Sunday morning so that I could experience the Eucharistic prayer with them and take communion--or as I called it at the time, ‘munion. But they didn’t want to force it onto me, so every Sunday they would ask me if I wanted to take the bread and wine, and every Sunday I would say yes.

I missed it once, although the true story of the occasion has been somewhat forgotten. My dad claims that he went to get me from the nursery only to find me fast asleep and he figured he would let me get on with it. My mom says that they forgot about me. I’m not sure who to believe. But let’s just say I was very disappointed when I found out that I had missed ‘munion.

But then all of a sudden I was older and questioning things that I had never really questioned before. Should I say the Nicene Creed or would I just be lying? Should I go up and receive communion? Should I ask for a blessing instead? Just stay in my seat?

The truth is I have no idea if I believe in God. *Pause* I have no idea what happens after we die. One time I was in a late night conversation with a friend and he asked me if I believed in God and heaven and all that and I said, “honestly I think that’s above my pay grade.”

The Good Stuff

There are some other things that I'm more sure of, although they haven't necessarily been easy to figure out. At the end of last year I was swimming two hours a day, six days a week and I had no idea if I was going to make it through swim season. I didn't know how I was going to survive when all I had time for was sleep, school, swim, pre calc homework, repeat. Oh and eating. It turns out that when you're swimming 12 hours a week you always have time to eat your parents out of house and home.

But all that was just the universe's way of reminding me how much I love reading and writing and painting. Poetry and Monet. All the good stuff. And all of the things that I had absolutely no time for.

So it should come as no surprise that when I was looking for inspiration for this sermon, I thought of a poem. The poem is called "When My Strength Faileth" by Catalina Ferro. There's a video of her performing it on Youtube: walking onto the stage full of power and truth in a Frida Kahlo t-shirt.

The poem chronicles her arriving at a church so that she can ask for forgiveness in a time when her strength has failed her only to find that--in her words-- "the priest knocked off work before I did." She finds the doors locked and herself standing in the cold. She asks how she can forgive herself without stepping into that space. It seems that church is hallowed ground for her, something like how this space is for me.

While so much of her poem is a topic for another time, I was completely taken by the idea of "When my Strength Faileth." The moment when there isn't a single ounce more to give of yourself. There isn't the power to lift a hand no matter what you may be shielding yourself from.

And it wasn't the first time that I had thought about this concept. I remember talking to my dad about my uncertainties about God and faith, and I'm probably misrepresenting what he said somewhat, but he told me that I probably wouldn't know if I didn't need God until I was given a moment where I really *needed* God. When my strength faileth. I remember being haunted by this idea. Did it mean that my relation with God was somehow being held hostage by some trauma yet to come. And I didn't know if that made me understand God and what he was to so many people or if it made me kind of resent him.

But even this wasn't the first time I had been taken with the idea of "When My Strength Faileth." That time I played Jesus in the passion play I remember vividly the scene of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. I had always been entranced by that part of the story of Jesus, even though other parts more or less went in one ear and out the other. I could never quite pinpoint why the story meant so much to me until now. But in that story, in that moment, Jesus expressed the idea that has seized me so many times in my life.

Jesus himself looked not to *the* father but to *his* father and said "My Strength Faileth."

Now it wasn't a coincidence that I thought of this in response to this set of readings. I sat down with them to study for this sermon, my favorite green pen in hand and began reading the collect. "O Lord, you have taught us that without love, whatever we do is worth nothing: Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you."

Ok, I thought. That's not too bad. I mean it's undeniably heavy stuff that without love our actions are worth nothing and we are accounted dead, but I think of myself as a pretty loving person. I'm not perfect, but I do my best.

But then Jesus--as he tends to do--raised the bar all the way up to the sky. In the Gospel he says, "Love your enemies... If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also."

That's right about when I thought, yeah I'm totally screwed. Thank God no one has ever punched me because I have absolutely no idea what I would do. But I don't think that offering the other cheek even makes the long list.

If that is the strength that Jesus is asking from me, I have never had enough. I have been in a constant state of failing strength.

But then I thought back on the times when my strength has failed me. Where like the poem I stood in the cold, locked out of the only place where I felt I could forgive myself if not forgive this world for what it had done.

It was late September of last year so it was still warm but wouldn't be for too much longer. I was driving downtown, getting stopped at every light, NPR playing in the background when my strength failed me. My dad and sister had Covid but I kept getting negative tests, which is to say that my time at home was spent hiding in my room from the global pandemic that had become much too personal. I knew that if I got it, the play that I had been rehearsing for that was supposed to be performed a week later would be ruined and I could only imagine the faces of my friends and cast mates if I had to tell them that I was going into quarantine. That I had single handedly ruined the show.

And we had just lost one of our own here at St. James. Someone I had grown up with, gone to camp with, seen every Wednesday and Sunday for years. The pandemic had kept us from really seeing each other for a long time and I wasn't sure if I had any right to be as upset as I was, but I also had to face the fact that scene I had in the back of my mind where we

reconnected, maybe talked about old times and decided to keep up with each other a little better was never going to happen.

My Strength Faileth.

It hardly bears repeating that humans aren't perfect. We aren't perfectly loyal or virtuous and we aren't perfectly loving. But isn't there something to be said about the fact that our strength fails us time and time again in the name of love. In the name of love lost, in the name of the love we could not give enough of, in the name of the love we did not *get* enough of.

If there was any moment of divine coincidence while I wrote this sermon it was this: as I watched the performance of "When My Strength Faileth" over and over again to draw inspiration for this sermon, every time I would look at the poet's Frida Kahlo t-shirt and think that must mean something. And then I got up from my desk, walked to my whiteboard to plan out this sermon and made direct eye contact with Frida Kahlo herself.

Right there on my whiteboard was a magnet a friend gave me of a Frida Kahlo quote: "Can verbs be made up?" she asked. "I'll tell you one. I heaven you, so my wings will open wide to love you boundlessly."

I have no idea if God is real. I have no idea what happens to us after we die. I have no idea how to love perfectly, to live fully, to embrace my deepest values, to live a life I won't someday regret, to live a life where my strength will never fail me.

But I know that if I live a life full of love it will all be okay. People die, friendships end, our strength fails us. But Jesus never fooled us into thinking that loving your neighbor as he would have us do doesn't sometimes end in us getting punched not once but twice, right in the face.

“Time makes you bolder, even children get older, and I’m getting older too.” And I’m learning that being wise doesn’t mean knowing everything. To be wise you need to know one thing and that is that you don’t understand everything there is to understand. I don’t understand God or Heaven or love because in the words of late night William, that’s above my pay grade.

But, you might ask, what did you do when your strength failed you? You’re still here aren’t you? You made it through?

I realized that I was once again that little boy that was too short to see past the pew right in front of his eyes. So I climbed onto my seat. I looked out, past myself at the people who were willing to give me their love. I looked up. I looked up towards something I didn’t understand and asked for help, suddenly okay with the fact that I am too small to know if I am screaming into the void or crying into the loving arms of the creator.

Life isn’t about knowing. If anyone is supposed to know everything it certainly isn’t a 17 year old boy and it certainly isn’t any of you. Life. Is. About. Loving.

So here we are. In that same situation that my teenage years keep finding me in. In my mind and my heart I know another value that will carry me to my grave. And once again the hardest part is before me. So what will we do?

We will walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us in an offering and a sacrifice to God.

Amen.