

I am honored to be here in this beautiful place with you all. Thank you for having me and thank you to Nona Beth for inviting me. I have been to Dayspring a handful of times and each time say: I must come more often. I imagine everyone says that. But now more than ever, in this challenging time in the world, I feel an even stronger pull towards God and his kingdom, finding solace and joy in His awesome creation of a place like Dayspring. I cannot go further though without acknowledging how nervous I am and simultaneously feeling assured of abundant grace here. While today it is because of sharing this message with you, it is a fairly consistent experience of how I go through this amazing life God has given me. I have built my message today around the Gospel but want to introduce myself to you a little more deeply, as I hope it will help with context for my words.

I come to you as a sister in Christ and in mission. That simple statement probably tells you all that is important about me – I love and I work. I know a lot and continue learning about the power of both love and work. I am a lifelong member of the United Methodist Church and am in love with my current church home, Wesley United Methodist Church down in Chevy Chase. The Methodist church shaped my vision of how to be in the world – open and generous, accepting and celebrating all, seeking justice and serving the poor and vulnerable. I always knew that it was my responsibility to show God’s love through my work.

Now, I am what you call a Displaced Texan, having moved here with my little family about 7 years ago. (I grew up in Oklahoma but we don’t talk too much about that because the Lone Star State has a remarkable capacity to take over your heritage if you let it.) Anyhoo, God called us to move here and I found myself looking for a place to work and people to love. I joyously found my mission at Jubilee JumpStart, a place built upon love, justice and faith. If you can imagine the warm, welcoming, light-filled place and the beautiful and brilliant children and teachers who spend their days at JJS, you know that I am blessed to be living a version of Frederick Buechner’s well-known quote: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” I have been loving, working, learning and growing there for 6 years now.

For my whole life, I’ve loved babies and small children. I still do, like crazy. I am that lady - making conversation with 6-month-olds in the grocery store,

playing peekaboo with a toddler on the bus, and hugging any preschooler I meet. I knew from my early years of babysitting and helping with Vacation Bible School that I would work with children and for children. And as I like to work hard, I found my first job out of college at Children's Protective Services in the big city of Houston, Texas. This small-town Oklahoma girl of 22 brought all of her love and willingness to work, because I sure didn't have anything else! As you might guess, the children were easy to love there. And then God took me further than I had imagined, by making me fall in love with their parents. So that's how we get into Matthew's Gospel reading today.

One other aside: I love this artist named Brian Andreas; some of you might recognize him as the maker of Story People. I have his art at home and at the center because it is always a whimsical drawing with wonderful messages that ring true to me. I saw this image just yesterday as I was completing preparations for today. It says: **"This is a creature on fire with love but it's still scary since most people think love only looks like one thing, instead of the whole world."** It almost knocked me over because it is such an apt way for describing my response to our reading today.

So in Matthew, Chapter 5...We've all heard of the instruction to turn the other cheek, so I thought I had a handle on what I was reading. But was it just me, or does anyone else start getting a little overwhelmed going through the next few verses? Really...? Give them my coat? Go a second mile? Don't refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you? Whew, that's a lot! But as I've learned over many years of work, love and life with God, I hang in there through the first reactions and feelings, to settle in and see what I am supposed to be learning. But it only got harder! "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Come on! But then the logic of God's loves shows up and, as always, led me to the message and to a familiar way of being in the world.

Verse 45: "...for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous...."

Verse 46: "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?"

Verse 47: “And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?”

I gave a sermon at Seekers Church last summer in which I shared my experience of finally realizing, thanks to fears and challenges I have faced in my leadership at JJS, that I too am a beloved child of God. I had spent the first 40+ years of my life sharing the good news of God’s love with and for everyone else, not quite realizing that I was leaving myself out of the best story in the world. I have only in recent years deeply embraced the knowledge that God loves me no matter what, not just because I take care of precious children and am friendly to strangers and not only when I am keeping my life together halfway decently. I had to face the radical idea that He created me and loves me with all of my imperfections and difficulties. And just as radically, He loves everyone else in this way. So this notion of loving all and loving without limits, felt both familiar and frightening...remember, that’s how I roll.

Let me tell you more about Jubilee JumpStart because it provides countless examples of love without limits. Our program opened in Adams Morgan about 7 years ago because of the incredible vision of Joe Collier and the love and support of countless individuals and faith communities of the Church of the Saviour. Ann Barnet, Gail Arnall, Susan Bell, and dear Nona Beth Cresswell, as well as Tom and Carolyn Hubers, all played integral parts in nurturing and growing this special place in its early years so that we can nurture and grow vulnerable children and families for many years.

We were founded upon the belief and findings that children with the greatest need and vulnerability benefit most from the highest quality of education and care. We provide a nationally-accredited, richly staffed program to serve 48 children from infancy through Pre-Kindergarten, with full time child care and support services for parents. Our community-based location and deep investment in relationships are two of our greatest hallmarks. The majority of our families have low incomes but we intentionally enroll around 30% who pay tuition rather than relying on child care subsidies. This approach reflects our community and is shown to have even better outcomes for low income children. We are also a dual language program, providing instruction in both English and Spanish. Again, this

reflects our community, both among families and teachers, and also provides even better outcomes for children. And quite personally, I was drawn to JJS because of the emphasis placed upon parents' needs during their children's early years. Going way back to my years with families experiencing abuse and neglect, all of my work since then has involved supporting parents in succeeding in the most important roles of their lives. Our goal at JJS is for children and parents to leave for their next school more ready to learn and love over the course of their lives.

So loving without limits at JJS... Unlike Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegone, we have had a few not-so-quiet-weeks lately. We recently walked as a tiny community through a really big process, loving and giving more, even when feeling frightened and anxious. Our blended ages for Pre-K and mixed income levels came to the fore as we needed to figure out how to distribute 16 slots among 23 currently enrolled children, basically deciding the fairest way to be unfair, with up to 7 children not being able to stay in our center for the coming year. I'll spare you the minutia, but have to tell you that anything I did and said throughout the process was because loving without limits brings me closer to God. I learned in recent years that being scared is my cue to reach out and simply see that God is with me. Our program was in a small crisis because of loving all of our children and families and not wanting to have anyone without a space. But through vulnerable, heart-wrenching conversations, our leadership team and parents came to the conclusion that prioritizing our younger and poorer children was what our mission compelled us to do. So while it has always been easy for me to love children, then to love parents, then to especially love families at risk, I had to get clear that loving families who have more resources is required too, for they are also in great need. It felt like a second mile to me, when I had really only planned to do the first. I am grateful to God for teaching me a few years earlier that He would love and guide me through such a scary and important process. By feeling God's presence, I was able to be more present with people in pain and fear.

We loved without limits just a few days ago by leaning into our philosophy of "caring for caregivers." One of the most powerful ways to support children is to ensure that the adults around them feel supported too. We do many things for both parents and teachers to help them create positive

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environments for children's learning and growth. On Monday, I was both alarmed and delighted when more than 50% of our teaching staff told me that they would not be at work on Thursday as they planned to participate in the "Day Without Immigrants" protest. I want justice and fairness for all, and was faced with how to live into that while continuing to meet our obligations to children and families. I stopped, breathed, felt God with me, and knew that the love and justice we want for our children starts with our teachers. With the support of a great leadership team, other staff and our amazing parents, we made the day work with only minor adjustments. God was deeply present on Ontario Road as 9 teachers, initially worried about stating their need, were relieved and empowered by learning that we love and value them both in their absence for one day along with their presence every other day. It was a powerful experience for us all to go from fear and scarcity to love and abundance so quickly. Because we are loved without limits, we are closer to God when we love others in the same way.

So here I am, for the millionth time, astounded and comforted by God's love for me and for everyone. My love and work in this world have long made it easy for me to love children and people who love children. But I can always love more – more deeply, more people, and when it is not so easy. JJS is a unique and amazing place because of the abundance of love flowing through it and showering down upon it. Our children, parents and teachers know they are beloved and turn second cheeks, go second miles and give each other their cloaks. After yet another miracle, I often say to myself and anyone who can hear: "God lives on Ontario Road." We are all on fire with love and showing ourselves and each other that love looks like the whole world. We are loving without limits. Thanks be to God.