

Becca Stevens Sermon at First Presbyterian – March 1, 2026

Please be seated. I'm kidding.

I'm really glad that we have some friends here from St. John's, the Episcopalians, who can show you how to really laugh it up and make a joyful noise during the sermon. I think Presbyterians get a bad reputation as the “chosen frozen,” but really the Episcopalians are the kings and queens of frozen. We're just not chosen.

What a gift it is to be here. Thank you to Mark, to Andy, to Meredith, to Scott, and to everyone who welcomed us. I loved our adult forum together, and thank you to everyone who stopped by and bought Thistle Farms products. We manufacture those products in Nashville, and we also distribute and sell on behalf of more than 1,200 women around the globe who are survivors of trafficking, addiction, and prostitution. For you to welcome us really keeps us going, honestly. You have already preached a gospel of hospitality and love, and we do not take that lightly. That is how we have made our way in the world, by people who were strangers loving us. I like to think of it as falling in love, and this is the beginning of it.

And really it is the beginning for Nicodemus and Jesus as well. Every three years we read the Gospel of John during Lent, and it is my absolute favorite. The stories in John during this Lenten season are powerful. If you do nothing else for Lent, read John. Read it as a story. I know that might sound radical for Episcopalians, but for Presbyterians I'm sure it is nothing unusual.

In these chapters, Jesus is telling us about the long journey of healing. First we meet Nicodemus, then the woman at the well, then the blind man, then Lazarus. Through these encounters Jesus shows how love heals. It looks different for every person he meets, but it is always love up close. Love in proximity. Love that is dogged. Love that is full of surrendering compassion.

So let's begin with Nicodemus.

The whole story begins with a whisper. I believe more truth is told in the whispering of church basements than from many pulpits. In those basements recovery groups gather, and people finally say the truth out loud: I have to find another way.

Those quiet conversations are where hearts are opened. Nicodemus is a powerful man in an occupied nation, yet he comes to Jesus in the night whispering for help. We know Nicodemus. We know the Nicodemus around us, and we know the Nicodemus within ourselves. Those whispers ask: Is this all there is? Isn't there something more?

As Mary Oliver wrote, we are given “this one wild and precious life.” Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night searching for meaning, searching for love.

At Thistle Farms we started with housing. Then we created a bath and body company because none of the women had employment, and we worried about their economic well-being. The company grew. We started tea companies and partnered with women around the world, selling soap from Wisconsin, honey from Maryland, tea from Mexico, and so many other products.

One time we were in Memphis hosting a tea party. We shared our message about healing and about how love heals. We drank tea grown by women near Guadalajara, women who recently endured a frightening week when cartel violence shut down their communities.

After the event, an 18-year-old woman who had been trafficked in Texas and was now part of our sister community in Memphis came up and whispered in my ear: “Tell me again what love is.”

It was a Nicodemus question.

After everything she had been through, she was asking what she could believe. With everything happening in the world, it is the same question we all ask: tell me again what love is.

That whisper sent me on a journey to remember for myself what love really asks of us. What does it mean for God to love the whole world? What does it mean to believe that love does not fail?

When we listen to those whispers, they carry us somewhere. For Nicodemus, they carried him forward. Later in John's Gospel he appears again, defending Jesus before the Sanhedrin. Something had changed in him. The whisper had grown into dogged love.

I like to say love moves us beyond dogma into doggedness. It moves us to defend one another, to stay with one another, to love each other faithfully.

We have seen this again and again at Thistle Farms. For thirty years we have seen how that kind of persistent love transforms lives.

Eventually we began linking human trafficking work with refugee communities. The church has helped change the language around trafficking, but refugees are still incredibly vulnerable. Many women fleeing war, poverty, or prison are at high risk for trafficking.

In 2017 we began working with Syrian women and other communities affected by war. After the invasion of Ukraine, we partnered with a group of women refugees and created an organization called Love Rises. The women began knitting blankets. For each blanket sold, they created educational kits for children living in bunkers.

The work grew. They opened a store and began shipping products around the world. One of the leaders, Marina, became a symbol of hope.

But last summer she sent me a message after a terrible night of bombing. She said she had lost hope and could barely get out of bed.

Then she remembered something. She wrote, “You haven't given up on us. I'm not going to give up.”

She quoted Martin Luther King Jr.: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

And I reminded her that those words were first spoken a century earlier by abolitionist preacher Theodore Parker, who believed that the universe bends toward justice because it is held by a loving God.

That is the long journey of love. We must be dogged. We must stay in it for the long haul.

From the tree of life in Genesis to the tree of life in Revelation, scripture carries a current of healing that never disappears.

Finally, after the whisper and the doggedness, there is surrender. Nicodemus teaches us that too. In the end he performs one of the most intimate acts in Scripture. He takes Jesus' body from the cross, anoints it with spices and oils, and lays him in the tomb.

In the end it is just love. Everything else falls away, and love remains.

All love begins with a whisper. A quiet call within us inviting us to love.

I could tell many heroic stories about the women who have graduated from Thistle Farms and become leaders. But instead I want to tell you about Peggy Sue.

I met Peggy Sue when she was chained to a hospital bed. She was dying and she was a prisoner. She kept quoting scripture to me and said she wanted to teach me the Gospel before she died.

She had endured abuse, addiction, poverty, and incarceration. When she died the hospital gave us her ashes in a cardboard box. Five of us gathered in a small chapel with a boom box for music. No one else knew her.

It felt like failure. Like a life that had ended without redemption.

But when we began the service something happened. The presence of love filled the room so powerfully that we all wept.

In that moment I realized that even when the world seems to have failed someone completely, love can still show up.

And I thought: if love can show up even there, then I will dedicate my life to that healing power.

Recently I was on an email chain with Father Greg Boyle, Richard Rohr, and others. Greg Boyle said that on a podcast he once said “love never fails,” and the host laughed and called it naive.

Greg responded that he couldn't name a time in history when love actually failed. There are many times when love was abandoned, or never attempted, or when people lost courage. But love itself has never failed.

We all hear the whispers. We are given community and compassion so that we can stay faithful.

May we continue to surrender to the never-failing healing power of love until we make our way back to our Creator on our own Easter morning.

Alleluia.