

A Light So Lovely (Summer Saints Series: Madeleine L'Engle)
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on July 7, 2024
Friendship Presbyterian Church

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’

But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So, the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

(Matthew 20:1-16, NRSV)

The gospel can be a funny thing sometimes. I think we would all say that we love a message of grace, of God’s love, and I would hope it’s said that the preaching from this pulpit has majored on such a message. We Presbyterians, these days anyway, don’t do “fire and brimstone” very well, and we wouldn’t have our hearts in it even if we tried.

But here’s the thing – consider this thought experiment – if I or any other preacher stood up and suggested that God’s love, God’s grace, is so great that in the fullness of time it may just overcome *all* resistance and finally welcome home *all* who reject it, or oppose it, or are indifferent to it now ... that God’s acceptance, love, forgiveness, mercy, and kindness will ultimately triumph, and God will be all in all, with *no one* finally outside, no one lost, no one condemned.

If folks really heard that, heard it clearly expounded with sound biblical and theological reasoning and heartfelt passion, what reactions would there be? Would most church-goers hear it and instinctively stand up and shout, "Praise God! Everyone might just get saved in the end!"?

While we may like to think so, I think in practice such a message of triumphant grace forgiving all sin is just as likely to provoke a quite different reaction. We *love* triumphant grace when we're thinking about our *own* sins, but when we're thinking about someone else's? Well, then, suddenly we see that we can't take this grace stuff too far or we don't have standards anymore, and so where's the incentive to be good and all that? And after all, why *should* God end up letting undeserving, ungrateful people, who haven't slogged it out going to church all their lives like we have, get the same *reward* we do?

The truth is, for all our gratitude for God's grace for ourselves, when we turn our attention to others, it's easy to traffic in what we think people *deserve*. The truth is, at the "end of the day," the grace of a gospel that doesn't stop with us is *offensive*.

It's this truth that was seen so clearly by our summer saint for this morning – the celebrated American author Madeleine L'Engle, best known for her fantasy classic *A Wrinkle in Time*, which won the Newbery Medal and became a touchstone in children's literature. Her work, notable for its blend of fantasy and science, and suffused with a deep Christian vision, has left a profound impact on generations of readers.

Madeleine L'Engle was born on November 29, 1918, in New York City, a place that would later serve as both home and inspiration throughout her life. She was named for her great-grandmother and spent her early years surrounded by the artistic and intellectual influences of her parents. Her father, Charles Wadsworth Camp, was a journalist and novelist, while her mother, Madeleine Hall Barnett, was a pianist. This nurturing environment laid the groundwork for her love of literature and the arts.

From a young age, young Margaret displayed a passion for writing. She penned her first story at the tender age of five and kept a journal from the time she was eight. Despite struggling academically in her early school years, her dedication to reading and writing never waned. After attending various boarding schools, she graduated from Smith College in 1941 with a major in English, and soon after began her journey as a published author.

Her first novel, *The Small Rain*, was published in 1945, followed by *Ilsa* in 1946. She met actor Hugh Franklin that same year when she appeared in Anton Chekhov's play "The Cherry Orchard," and she married him within months. Later writing of their meeting and marriage, she said, "We met in 'The Cherry Orchard' and were married in 'The Joyous Season.'" The couple's first daughter, Josephine, was born the following year.

The young family then moved to a 200-year-old farmhouse called Crosswicks in the small town of Goshen, Connecticut in 1952. To replace Franklin's lost acting income, they purchased and operated a small general store, while L'Engle continued with her writing, and their son Bion was

born that same year. Four years later, another child, seven-year-old Maria, the daughter of family friends who had died, came to live with the Franklins, and they adopted her shortly thereafter. During this period, L'Engle also served as choir director for the local Congregational church.

Despite having already published two books, L'Engle determined to give up writing on her 40th birthday (November 1958) when she received yet another rejection notice. "With all the hours I spent writing, I was still not pulling my own weight financially," she said, though she soon discovered both that she could *not* give it up and that, despite herself, she had always continued to work on fiction subconsciously.

In 1959, the family returned to New York City so that her husband could resume his acting career – a move which was immediately preceded by a ten-week cross-country camping trip, during which L'Engle first had the inspiration that would lead to *A Wrinkle in Time*, which she completed, at least in manuscript form, by 1960. This work would of course prove to be her great breakthrough and the beginning of her finding her true voice and audience, though it was quite an arduous journey from the initial manuscript to actual publication a full *two years* later, it having been rejected more than 30 times by numerous publishers for being too complex and unconventional for children's literature.

A Wrinkle in Time defied categorization, blending elements of science fiction, fantasy, and spirituality. The story follows Meg Murry, her brother Charles Wallace, and their friend Calvin O'Keefe as they journey through space and time to rescue Meg's father from an evil force. The novel introduced young readers to complex scientific concepts and philosophical questions, all wrapped in an engaging and adventurous narrative. As I've mentioned, it went on to win the Newbery Medal in 1963, solidifying L'Engle's place in the canon of children's literature.

She continued to explore themes of science, faith, and human connection in her subsequent works. The Time Quintet, which includes *A Wrinkle in Time*, *A Wind in the Door*, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, *Many Waters*, and *An Acceptable Time*, expands on the adventures of the Murry and O'Keefe families, delving deeper into cosmic and metaphysical realms. Beyond children's literature, L'Engle also wrote for adults. Her series of autobiographical works, including *The Crosswicks Journals*, offer profound reflections on family, faith, and the creative process. Titles like *The Arm of the Starfish* and *A House Like a Lotus* reveal her versatility, seamlessly blending mystery, romance, and spiritual inquiry.

One absolutely unmistakable dimension of her writing is her deep – and sometimes unconventional – Christian faith. Outwardly, it looked normal enough – she was an Episcopalian and served as a librarian and writer-in-residence at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City. But her faith journey was not without struggle; she grappled with doubt and sought to reconcile scientific understanding with spiritual belief, leading to a theological vision that was remarkably expansive and inclusive.

For one thing, for her, faith and science were not mutually exclusive but complementary ways of understanding the universe. This integral perspective suffuses her work, where characters often confront and contemplate the mysteries of existence, the nature of good and evil, and the interconnectedness of all creation.

This deep intuition of the interconnectedness of all things and of God's love animating the whole creation led her to embrace a belief in universal salvation, the idea that in the end, all human beings of all times and places will be reconciled to God and received into the heavenly embrace. Writing of this in her 1986 book of spiritual reflections, *A Stone for a Pillow*, she said,

All will be redeemed in God's fullness of time, all, not just the small portion of the population who have been given the grace to know and accept Christ. All the strayed and stolen sheep. All the little lost ones.

Her belief in universal salvation was rooted, not in some naïve, sentimental view of human nature, nor in a diminished view of the reality of evil, but rather in her expansive and inclusive understanding of God's love. She saw God's love and grace as boundless and all-encompassing, extending beyond the confines of human judgment and limitations. This perspective is evident in her writings, where themes of redemption, forgiveness, and the transformative power of love frequently appear, and in this way, she was influenced by the writings of early Christian theologians like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, who also espoused ideas of universal reconciliation. With them, she believed that, ultimately, God's love would triumph over all forms of evil and suffering, leading to the restoration of all creation.

But perhaps most of all, she was moved by the great Scottish fantasist and Christian George MacDonald who also embraced this radical view of God's love triumphant in the end. In his spirit, she wrote concerning the idea of an eternal Hell,

I cannot believe that God wants punishment to go on interminably any more than does a loving parent. The entire purpose of loving punishment is to teach, and it lasts only as long as is needed for the lesson. And the lesson is always love.

It may go without saying that L'Engle's views were not without controversy. Some critics and readers found her theology to be at odds with traditional Christian orthodoxy, and in this particular respect, it certainly was. Consequently, many so-called Christian bookstores – the same sorts of places that carry the brazen nonsense of prosperity gospel books – refused to carry *her* books, which were also frequently banned from evangelical Christian schools and libraries. The irony of course is that she had any number of secular critics who attacked her work for being far *too* religious. You can't win for losing, I guess!

All that said, L'Engle was unapologetic about her beliefs. She held firm to her understanding of God's nature as one of overwhelming love and mercy, rather than punitive judgment. And this view of God's nature led her to deeply personal and insightful spiritual reflections in her memoirs, in which she candidly discussed her experiences of grief, joy, doubt, and the everyday

challenges of living a faithful life that could encompass both the beauty and pain of existence. Her honesty and vulnerability, and emphasis on compassion, resonated with readers seeking to navigate their own spiritual journeys.

Madeleine L'Engle passed away near her home in Litchfield, Connecticut on September 6, 2007, and was interred at the Cathedral of St John the Divine in Manhattan, but her voice lives on in her expansive body of work. She inspired generations of readers and writers to explore the boundless realms of imagination and faith, and her stories encourage readers of all ages to ask the big questions and to seek God's truth and beauty in everything around them.

And that's precisely what, for Madeleine L'Engle, good fantasy helps us do – to seek and see the truth and beauty of God at the heart of all that is, of all creation. Like George MacDonald and J.R.R. Tolkien before her, she knew that good fantasy can help us recover our sense of wonder and enchantment in the world ... to help us see it as we are *meant* to see it, as finally *God's* world, and thereby be able to receive the divine consolation that this whole world – despite evil and suffering – is itself destined for a “happy ending.”

This imaginative theological vision is not only what pulsates through her writing but also what empowered her gracious response to her critics. She never felt that the gospel of God's all-inclusive, ultimately triumphant love in Christ *needed* any loud, angry, or aggressive defense, for as she wrote elsewhere,

We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.

The *loveliness* of God's mercy and grace will have the final word in reality.

It is this faith that Madeleine L'Engle held to with all her heart, and it is this divine love which calls to us and claims us even now. This doesn't mean that all our questions are answered, or that we can any more plumb the mystery of suffering and evil any better than we did before. And it certainly doesn't remove the common-sense offense of grace, which happily goes on its merry way. But as another great theological mind once put it, that for all our remaining questions,

This much is certain, that we have no theological right to set any sort of limits to the loving-kindness of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ. Our theological duty is to see and to understand it as being still greater than we had seen before.

[Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*]

To the glory of God! Amen.