

Easter5_YrC_042416_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Over the last six years, I, like many of you, fell in love with the PBS Masterpiece series *Downton Abbey*. We all had our favorite characters, and our Monday morning conversations with friends at school or at work often centered around what happened the night before. I loved Lady Violet and her caustic wit, Tom Branson and his refusal to be intimidated by the Grantham nobility, Mrs. Hughes, of course, and, at the end of the last season, even Lady Mary and Thomas, the butler. There was a happy ending for almost everyone and a lot of love all around.

One of the things that happened to me during the run of *Downton Abbey* was that I began to watch more PBS in general, and I discovered two other British shows that I have grown to love even more. The first is *Call The Midwife*, a series about young nurses and an order of Anglican nuns who live together in a convent, working as midwives in post-WWII London's working-class East End.

From the beginning, the nurses and the sisters have dealt with a number of important social topics, such as unwanted pregnancies, abortion, birth defects, poverty, prostitution, incest, racism, prejudice, alcoholism, and (illegal in the 1950s) homosexuality. Sometimes the storylines are sentimental, but most often there is an edge to each story that evokes thoughtful consideration and, often, tears.

Last week's episode, for instance, was particularly tough. One of the sisters, Sr Winifred, learns that Dorothy, a local unmarried teacher, has become pregnant - by a married man. Sr Winifred was a teacher before she became a midwife, and she believes that teaching is an honorable profession. Although she had been very friendly with her beforehand, Winifred is very disapproving of Dorothy, and shows it. She even goes so far as to suggest to the sister-in-charge, Sr Julienne, that Dorothy be transferred to the midwives of another district so she won't have to take care of her. Sr Julienne reminds her that her job is to take care of people, not to judge them, but Sr Winifred cannot reconcile that with her feelings.

Meanwhile, the married man who had the affair with Dorothy will have nothing to do with her now that she is pregnant; her landlady finds out she is pregnant and kicks her out of her flat; and, because the landlady is so very judgmental, she makes it her business to tell the principal of the school where Dorothy teaches that she is pregnant, and Dorothy loses her job. She would have lost the job anyway, because even a married teacher who became pregnant would not be allowed to keep her job in the 1960s, but everything is made worse by the landlady's meddling.

Dorothy now has nowhere to turn, so she goes to the convent to ask for help. Sr Winifred gives her the cold shoulder, but Sr Julienne finds her a room in a women's shelter. Feeling incredibly alone and unsupported by everyone in her life, Dorothy makes a decision out of extreme fear and desperation - she tries to perform an abortion on herself, knowing that in doing so she could be arrested and charged with a crime.

The result is that she almost loses her life.

When Winifred finds out what has happened, she is distraught, and, although she blames herself for rejecting Dorothy, thinks there is nothing more that can be done. But Julienne tells her that Dorothy has never had more need of a friend than now. So Winifred goes to see her in the hospital. Dorothy says, "Please, Sister, don't hate me!" Beyond the curtains around the bed are the police. Dorothy says, "I'm awfully frightened." Sr Winifred takes her by the hand and says, "I'm here. I'm here."

When the policeman comes in, she says to him, "I'd like to stay with Miss Whitmore." So Sr Winifred remains by Dorothy's bedside while he interviews her about what happened. Afterward, Sr Winifred says to the policeman, "Sergeant, she'll never have a family now, and she almost lost her life. Surely that's enough."

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The other show I discovered is called "*Grantchester*" - also British, also set in the 50s and 60s. But *Grantchester* is the name of a small village near Cambridge - away

from the hustle and bustle of the East End of London - with lovely meadows, a meandering river, one of the oldest universities in the world - and a rather frequent occurrence of murders.

The two main characters are a local policeman, *Geordie* - who is an overworked and overwhelmed family man with 4 children, trying to keep the two parts of his life separate - and *Sydney Chambers* - the local Vicar - a Cambridge man, a war hero, single, incredibly good looking, with a penchant for helping *Geordie* solve the murders that occur.

There are other characters, too - *Mrs. Maguire*, the very opinionated, lonely, widowed housekeeper at the Vicarage; *Leonard*, the fresh-out-of-seminary, repressed and closeted curate; *Amanda*, *Sydney's* best friend, who is unhappily married to a very rich man; and *Dickens*, *Sydney's* Lab puppy who loves everyone unconditionally.

The murders - like the stories encountered by the midwives - confront the social issues of the times. But *Grantchester* is not as interested in presenting formulaic Murder-She-Wrote-mysteries to solve as it is in examining the fundamental nature of the human heart.

In one episode, a teenage girl in the village who has been raped and is pregnant asks her best friend, a teenage boy, to help her abort the baby. While trying to do what she asked, he accidentally kills her. The entire village turns against him. Members of *Sydney's* congregation want the boy's mother to be thrown out of the church; they move away from her at the altar rail at communion, giving her hateful glances as they pass by.

Sydney believes the boy's claim that it was accidental and vows to testify on his behalf; *Geordie* is convinced the boy is guilty, but crosses the line by presenting false evidence against him in his zeal to make the guilty verdict happen. This threatens to destroy the relationship between the two men, as well as *Sydney's* relationships with others in the village.

But *Sydney* stands before the congregation on Sunday to preach, "*Love should be nurtured and encouraged, not manipulated to serve our own purposes. Love is a treasure...*"

Sydney's words are not only for the people of the village; they are also for his own household. He offers love to his housekeeper despite her opinions. He offers it to Leonard, who in that day and time would be jailed for who he is. He offers it to Geordie, even though he often disagrees with him over the worth of the various people they encounter in their work.

Sometimes, Sydney's kindness takes hold. Love - and truth - flow in turn from this makeshift family who welcome broken people and look for ways to help them. In their work of hospitality, in their deep, unshakable longings, and in the love that lives there, this house is like the Upper Room, where the makeshift family of disciples gathers for the Last Supper.

At the Last Supper there is deep tenderness and momentous healing, and also much pain. Awkwardness, confusion, betrayal, abiding love and hope are all there, just as they are all here, in this room. The love Jesus offers everyone in that room and in this one is transcendent and intimate, a powerful blessing for all. And when Judas departs to betray him, Jesus does not give up on him. He does not give up on us, either. Instead, he reminds everyone of what he said earlier, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Choose love, my friends. Love one another.