

January 30, 2022  
Epiphany 4-C  
All Saints', Littleton, NH  
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Annual Meeting Day

Jeremiah 1: 4-10  
Psalm 71: 1-6  
Corinthians 13: 1-13  
Luke 4: 21-30

In this morning's readings we have the call narrative for the prophet Jeremiah, the great love chapter from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the continuation from last week of Jesus' reading in his hometown synagogue. I want to spend a few moments commenting on the gospel and the Corinthians passage. I'll start first with the gospel.

Last week, in the previous section of this gospel, Jesus was in his hometown, Nazareth, and read from Isaiah about the one who is coming to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. This week he tells them that in their hearing on that day the scripture 'is fulfilled'. The scripture says that they spoke well of him, that there was a sense that the hometown boy had done well. They were a little surprised because, as they said, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" ...in other words, 'how'd did he get to be so smart. '

Jesus' reputation had preceded him from Capernaum, a city on the northwest corner of the sea of Galilee, about 40 miles from Nazareth. They had probably heard the stories of his miracles and wanted him to do the same in his hometown. So he says this

little proverb that was probably well known, 'Physician, heal thyself.' ...in other words, do here for your own people what you have done elsewhere. (This little saying at the beginning of his ministry is echoed somewhat at the end of his ministry when he was on the cross, and onlookers said, "he saved others, but he cannot save himself") But according to Luke's own gospel there were Romans soldiers stationed there in Capernaum, so though it was a Jewish town in the Galilee, there were a lot of gentiles around. Maybe there was a little jealousy. Perhaps the more pure Jewish hill town of Nazareth was a bit resentful of what they had heard Jesus had done there. And Jesus then says that great, and often quoted line, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country."

And adding fuel to the fire, Jesus goes on to remind them of 2 great Old Testament stories of how God used foreigners or healed foreigners instead a person of the Jewish nation. This sent them over the edge and they set about to kill him for his blasphemy by attempting to literally throw him over the edge. In religious law you could stone someone either by literally throwing stones at them, or by throwing them upon stones---so in this case, throwing him off a cliff.

This is where we get into Luke's editorial goal that carries right on through his writing of the book of Acts. For scholars, they commonly refer to these 2 books almost as one: "Luke-Acts", because the authorship is assumed to be the same person. And the Book of Acts, of course, is the whole telling of the story of how the gospel, largely through Paul, goes out to the Gentile world – one long Epiphany, as it were. So, Luke had Jesus in his hometown, in his home synagogue, speaking to his own intimate

family and neighbors, who reject him. This little scene becomes the preface and prophecy for the whole gospel – the story of Jesus’ rejection by his own people, and his teaching which is meant for everyone.

So here is a cautionary tale for us. Are we spiritually awake enough to see and hear Christ in the persons we least expect it from? Perhaps a little example of this is as teenagers we all go through a phase where we think our parents are the thickest people on earth and that anything they do or say is about the stupidest thing anyone could do or say. Then, if we mature, somewhere in our twenties when we have started to deal with the hard realities of life, we go home and talk with our parents and wonder to ourselves, “Jeez, when did mom and dad get so wise?” Sometimes, however irksome it might be, it is the people close to us who can be the Christ to us-- for comfort, counsel, or for caution. But sometimes it can be the homeless guy on the street, the cop who just pulled you over, or the friend on their deathbed. Not only should we be looking to serve the Christ in the other, but maybe we need to have ears open to hear the Christ from the least expected other.

And so, on to Paul’s greater chapter on love. I suppose if we really ‘got’ this 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of First Corinthians, then having our eyes and ears opened would be second nature. We so often hear this chapter at weddings because it is all about love, but the kind of love Paul is speaking about is really not just for spouses, it really is for all of us and what is important in our daily life in community and in the world. Paul, as we heard last week, had been counseling the Corinthians about the spiritual gifts and their

proper use. But now he launches into this great poetic chapter to put even the great gifts in their place relative to love.

In the beginning of this chapter he basically says that all spiritual gifts and even personal sacrifices for God's glory are nothing without love. And unfortunately Christian history is riddled with stories of people doing things, they thought, for God, but really did not have love in their hearts. This love that Paul is talking about is the Greek word 'agape' – the kind of love that is 'self-sacrificing'. After saying how useless great gifts are without love, he goes on to define what love is and what characterizes love: patient and kind, not boastful, envious, arrogant or rude. "It does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." Jesus thought that love was central also – when he was asked what was the greatest commandment, he said "love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and the second was like it – to love neighbor as yourself."

[And here a little aside.....speaking of loving neighbor, did you hear the story this last week about how a Kansas City Chief's fan, after his team defeated the Buffalo Bills, put out a challenge on the internet for Kansas City Fans to donate to a children's hospital in Buffalo to show good sportsmanship and how Americans can be united about greater things....the last I heard there was over \$400,000 donated by Chief's fans. Wonderful. We need more of that!]

At the end of this chapter Paul touches his mystical side when he talks about growing out of his spiritual childhood and seeing in a mirror only dimly now; but then, when all is revealed – our death? – we shall see face to face. Now we know only in part, but then we will know fully, "even as we are known fully". Anyone who is a practitioner

of contemplative prayer knows this truth experientially. And anyone who is steeped in prayer and a true disciple of Jesus, also knows the centrality of this agape love.

And, of course, for us, as Jesus taught, when we live in this kind of love it will set us free! What's interesting is that this kind of love and freedom is not an anemic unconnected spiritual exercise. This love and compassion is what grounds the work of God's people through the ages. As Paul said to the Corinthians, do-gooderism and self-promotion in disguise as being knowledgeable, wise, or prophetic, is nothing without love.

Today is our annual meeting. I've been writing and compiling the annual report from submissions sent in by various team leads. I worked on the vestry book which records all the service, the types of service, the number attended, etc., in order to report them to the diocese and national church. I've also been pouring over the parish register to make sure various sacramental events were entered this year and we have a reliable recording of those who are active in the parish. Lots of data and numbers. But what the data and the numbers don't show, is the motivation of all the volunteers who are living out their vocation to love God and neighbor.

We are a strong and thriving parish in spite of the pandemic. Much has been happening for which we can be rightfully proud. But, as Paul, says, if it is done without this deep connection to the love of God, it really is all for naught. And this is always the challenge in our walk of faith – how to get from commandment to revelation! From: 'You SHOULD be more loving', to: 'but I am loved, God is love, we are surrounded by love, how can I not walk in love?'