



“Love”

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or 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. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Luke 4:21-30

Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Our Scripture readings this morning consist of two passages which might seem to have nothing to do with each other. The first one we heard Matt read for us contains the beautiful and familiar words of First Corinthians about love. And the next, from the gospel of Luke, has Jesus nearly being thrown off a cliff. We might wonder: where’s the love in that?!? Where’s the love in Jesus’ message and ministry? Actually--everywhere. Probably far greater than we think. Surely much more than we are often comfortable with. Love. God’s love. A love with a very long trajectory and an astonishingly wide reach.

The reading from First Corinthians is a passage we love to love. Often when couples are planning their wedding, they request these words. “You know”, they say to me, “that one about love.” And we hear it and get a little misty-eyed in the context of two persons declaring their love for one another and those of us who have been at it for awhile pray that they will grow into the fullness of its depth and its joy. “Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or rude. It does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice in wrong-doing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things...”

Fact of the matter is--it’s not always easy to live this out in marriage, is it, or in our families, or with our friends? A supportive community helps. A congregation, a church...

As the Rev. Samuel Lloyd, past Dean of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., once said: “The church is the one place where we can know we are loved completely, and that this love will not stop seeking to break down the walls that divide us, even until the end of time. There is nothing, nothing, that the world, or you and I, need more than that love.”

But now, what in the world is happening to Jesus in this story from Luke and where is the love? He has barely begun his ministry. He had started to teach and was being praised by everyone, Luke says. And then that day, he stood in the synagogue and read from the prophet Isaiah: “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me...” to do what? “To bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery

of sight to the blind to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon him. So far so good.

But Jesus just can't seem to leave well enough alone. If he'd gone back to his seat at that point, he probably would have been OK. But, he continues on, wanting to make explicit what this anointing with God's love is going to mean, how it's going to push them way beyond where they might have ever wanted to go, beyond the edge of their established community--and as we see, it nearly gets him hurled off the cliff.

We might miss his point and surely its power if we're not as up on our Bible as we might wish. So those stories about Elijah and Elisha and the widow and the leper might just fly right past us like words of Scripture can sometimes do. We know it must be important because it's in the Bible but we really don't have any idea what it's about. Well, we need to know, because it's all about love, God's love, and it's really pretty wonderful.

Jesus is telling us here something about himself and about prophets and about God's love. Elijah and Elisha were both prophets and they also had been anointed, just like Jesus, to speak for God. And we know enough to know that prophets often get in trouble because God has them say things that no one wants to hear. Sure enough. Elijah was rejected by the people, so God sent him to a Gentile woman, a widow, someone clearly outside the "in-group," as a way of signaling that God's love extended outside the "in-group," too. Same with Elisha. God sent him to help a leprous Syrian soldier rather than healing those in Israel afflicted with leprosy. Same message. God's love is bigger than you think. God's love extends to all "those people", however you define "those people", the ones outside the circle, the ones we write off, the ones we deem expendable. The ones everyone loves to hate.

Jesus didn't have to go on and say: "And I'm a prophet, too. And I'm bringing the same message." They got his point. And it infuriated them. And they chased him out of town, ready to hurl him off a cliff. God's love is still so often bigger than what we're willing to accept or embrace. And though we might not fess up to wanting to throw Jesus off a cliff, I suspect that we find other less visible ways of rejecting or ignoring his prophetic teachings about love.

But, oh how this love is needed in this world of ours, a world increasingly divided by what is called "localism" or "tribalism." A world in which hate crimes are on the increase. We're going backwards on this one at a rapid pace. We're drawing lines and building fences and keeping people out. All over the globe we're hunkering down in smaller and smaller units of ethnic and tribal allegiance, at odds with all others.

God holds us to a higher standard in this world and it's all about love. In every age, God anoints prophets to remind us of the message that rings clear over and over again through the Scriptures that God intends for the people of God to become a universal, inclusive community representing God's love and acceptance for all. The psalmist said it: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and all who live in it." The First Epistle of John assures us, saying: "... perfect love casts out fear...we love because God first loved us. Those who say, "I love God" and hate their brother or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

This is a hard word, far from the misty-eyed sentimentality often associated with Paul's words to the Corinthians. And those who speak of this sort of love in any age run the risk of being run out of town and right up to the edge of the cliff.

But I am persuaded that it is God's true word for us. It is at the heart of Jesus' message and his whole reason for being among us. And if now we see in mirror but dimly, in the fullness of God's time and in the fullness of God's love, we shall see face to face. If now we know only in part, then we shall know fully. For faith, hope and love abide, and the greatest of these is love.

May God help us, and hold us, and anoint us to witness to this awesome life-changing, world-transforming love.

Thanks be to God!