

Acts of Love—4th Sunday after the Epiphany

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[Jeremiah 1:4-10](#)

[Psalm 71:1-6](#)

[1 Corinthians 13:1-13](#)

[Luke 4:21-30](#)

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

In Luke's Gospel this morning we have the continuing story of Jesus' experiences in his hometown, we see the reaction of anger to God's love. Folks in Jesus' hometown like his sermon on Isaiah at first. After he read it aloud in the synagogue, they "all spoke well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." But when Jesus began to push the envelope and talk about the real love of God... then, Scripture tells us, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

What did Jesus do to make them so mad?

Well, he told them stories about God's giving and God's healing. But he told them—in the stories of their Scriptures—that God's love extended to foreigners and enemies. To the widows of Sidon came hope and life through the prophet Elijah. And healing came to Naaman the Syrian through Elisha. Why would the people get so mad about love?

Well, ask yourselves, why do folks get so angry now about providing equal and equitable opportunities to communities of color in the United States, both in Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s day and, of course, still today? Or, to put it another way: Why did Cain kill his brother Abel? Why did humanity crucify Jesus?

The conventional answer is sin, but I don't think that word gets us anywhere, anymore. Sin is quite real. But as a word it is often a shortcut, and it stops us from focusing on God, and who God is. This morning, we get a very clear glimpse of who God is both in Jeremiah's prophetic call and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Paul's letter to the fledgling church in the port town of Corinth, just 40 miles or so east of Athens, will continue to guide us until we enter the season of Lent in March. Again, as you might remember, Paul's letter was not written for a happy occasion. The church in Corinth had strayed from the point, from the path in Christ that Paul had set them on when he founded their community around the year 50 AD. Now, some years later, there was dissension and

bickering, people were being left out from the communion table because they were poor, racial arguments about Judeans and Greeks were stewing, and there were raucous and divisive debates about who and what was better. So, in a nutshell, they were being human, just as we in our culture now continue to be people under the spell of that thing, sin.

This passage we have from Paul's letter this morning is quite famous—very often chosen to be read at the joyful occasion of weddings, because it uses that four-letter word: love. However, you'll notice that Paul's message is not so much about romantic love. Paul is saying, instead, that you may do anything—prophecy, knowledge, faith, miracles, charity—but if these are done without a patient, kind, fairness-seeking love then they are meaningless and empty.

We have been talking about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. these past weeks. And the work of his that we heard on January 16th can shed quite a bit of light on this kind of “love” that Paul is saying is incredibly foundational to our lives in Christ. Dr. King wrote in 1957: “...the end [the point, the goal] of the civil rights movement is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. The type of love that I stress here is not eros, a sort of esthetic or romantic love; not philia, a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends; but it is agape which is understanding goodwill for all... It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of [humanity]. This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization.”

Eros, Philia, and Agape are Greek words. English is quite unique in its singular word “love” for all these things. Agape is an overflowing loving-kindness which seeks nothing in return. It is a love that gives, not likes. This is the love that we constantly confess that God has for all creation. This is the love that Scripture shows us in acts of healing and liberation. This is the love Paul is talking about. And Christ passing through death for us is an *ultimate* image of this love.

This love, Paul tells us, **never ends**—which is an incredible message! This love is infinitely powerful. It is so powerful, so open, so unwilling to choose sides, or make preferences, that more often than not, this love *makes people angry*.

In the prophetic call of Jeremiah, we have another glimpse of this love of God, and what it can do. God is calling Jeremiah, who was perhaps not even a teenager yet, looking at the Hebrew of this passage. God, it would seem, is calling Jeremiah to frightening work. Jeremiah writes:

*Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,
“Now I have put my words in your mouth.
See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,*

*to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”*

The “words” in Jeremiah’s mouth are God’s love. They are God’s busting desire for both justice and joy in all creation. When people cannot accept God’s love for themselves and for others—that word of love becomes a plucking, a pulling, destroying and overthrowing for them. They experience God’s love like a death, which to be honest, it sometimes is. What if we were to tell ourselves this merger of ours was all part of God’s love? Because for those who are given the ears to hear it, at the same time, God’s love is also a Word of building and planting. This love is new life. The **process** of death and new life, you could say, are God’s love.

And that takes us back to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. In a way, in a very fascinating and mysterious way, Paul is talking more about what we **do not know** than what we do. Prophecies end. Tongues and spiritual gifts are partial. Knowledge is incomplete. To update this church-language. Sunday school ends. Outreach programs are only partial. Congregations are incomplete. What does not end is love.

The Holy Spirit is saying this morning: digging down, digging down past tradition, past ethnicity, plucking up preference, overthrowing and letting go of what is only partial, **under all that stuff is the wellspring of God’s love—flowing, forever**. This love is the source of all that will last in this place we call Church.

I testify to you today, it is down beneath us—an underground stream. It is there. And God has had us dig and let go of many things to taste it

As I have been saying in the past few weeks, these Sundays after Epiphany are an opportunity for us (as a new congregation) to double down, and let God remind us of what we are doing, **and why**. And here is the “why,” in its rawest form: God’s love has sustained us truly since we were born, just like the Psalmist. And even though it will always enrage the world, just like in Nazareth, God’s love is what we were formed in the womb to tell the world, just like Jeremiah.

That love of God, which surpasses all understanding, can set us free, it does keep us cosmically safe, and it will deliver all people. Because that love—above, beneath, below, within and without us—never ends.

Amen.