

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Focus: I Cor. 13 & Luke 4:21-30

May I speak to you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is a great follow up to last week's call to come and to embrace our need for one another.

We have two interesting passages paired together. The all too familiar chapter on love from Paul's letter to the Corinthians and Luke 4 that ends in rage and attempted murder. The kicker is that Jesus starts the fight in our gospel reading.

First let us consider this all too familiar love chapter in Corinthians. Paul is writing with emphasis in these 3 chapters of this book – 12, 13, and 14 – in order to confront the Corinthian church. They are being a bit prideful and imposing themselves on one another as they move with arrogance and meanness. So, Paul is describing everything in this chapter that likely mirrors who they are, while also labeling what they are not.

As he writes on love, he moves from how someone is regarded by others to characteristics to action. Where he ends is kind of what we saw last week with

the Nehemiah passage. The people showed up and helped one another and accepted one another. In simplicity, we saw there and hear now from Paul that love is something you do. It is action.

Paul uses the word for love, agape in the Greek, 8 times in this passage.

Repetition always shows us something is important. Agape, as you may know is one of four words for love in Greek. The others are: Storge – familial or family love, Philia – friendship love, and Eros – romantic love. This love, agape is different because it is the love that is unconditional. It does not change, is not withheld...ever. It is how God loves us. This love we heard, never ends, or in the Greek, never fails – it cannot break. Can't. Impossible.

C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Problem of Pain*, as he writes on the paradox of God's power and human suffering, describes God's love. He asserts God's love is present to us always: "not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible of their guests, but the consuming fire of [God's-self], the Love that made the worlds."

This is the love focused upon us ALL the time.

It is hard to grasp that.

In our reading today, Paul is saying, love with agape love – not simply for others to be happy or comfortable but to grow in our union with one another, and to know more of who we are created to be.

This does not come natural to us. We need God to do it. We need to practice the reality of our connection to God and grow in knowing God as the power source.

Our limitations and dysfunctions mix so well with family, friend, and romantic love. We need the caliber of God's love to relate well.

Not connecting to the power source to love is kind of like trying to dry your hair without plugging in the hair dryer. You hold that thing at all angles around your head. It is there. But it is not doing a thing. I think sometimes that is what our love can be like at its worst.

Connecting to the power source to love. Like anything else we need God's help with or want, we simply ask God. Help me to love, to love with your love.

That brings us to our crazy gospel reading. Today's reading takes place right after everyone was so impressed with Jesus in the temple. It all starts so positive, "is this not Joseph's son?" and then in response Jesus puts words in their mouths.

“Doubtless you will quote to me,” he says, “Doctor cure yourself! And you will say, “Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.”

It is pretty strange, because he seems to be saying things in a direction that they are not talking. We have to remind ourselves that Jesus is God, so he understands the thoughts of the hearts of those there with complete accuracy. Jesus revs things up when he next says, “But the truth is...” and he contrasts geography, and people by their ethnicity and place in culture of power or powerlessness. And we hear these words fill them with rage.

What a passage to be paired with I Corinthians 13.

What is Jesus doing? Well, Jesus is doing what he is always doing. Loving. Lewis further writes on God’s love, that this love “labours to make us lovable” – that God’s love is “impeded and repelled by certain stains in our present character.” In this passage, as tough as it seems, God is labouring with God’s love.

Pragmatically here, Jesus is offending the mind to reveal the heart – which we see often in his ministry. Jesus is God - he can do that. We do not have that kind of accuracy and understanding, so we need to be more careful. Jesus is challenging his audience concerning inclusivity and expectations. Like Paul is

doing with the Corinthians who are pridefully lording it over others about spiritual gifts.

Both Jesus and Paul are pointing people to the truth. Truth.

We know that love is unconditional with God, but we also observe that love rejoices with the Truth as Paul put it or speaks the truth as Jesus did it.

Unconditional love, committed to the truth. At the same time.

We additionally see, through Jesus' words, that love is inclusive. It is broad. High. Deep. Always.

In our human love expressed as storge or philia or eros, we can vacillate, in our ongoing propensity to sin, from being wishy washy, so nice that its gooey, to being filled with rage. We need the tempering of love that comes from our connection to God – agape.

Jesus can love like he is loving because he divinely has the right – authority - and right – accurate - information to do so. We cannot do that – we are not God, but we can glean about the demands of 1 Corinthians 13 love through this narrative – and it kind of depends on our temperament in a way.

For some of us, it is the lesson that love, agape love, is not in a hurry. It is a long haul – we will relate to each other for eternity, so it can take its time. Some of us need to not confront too quickly.

For others of us, it has to do with our view of conflict and confrontation. We almost see in this text that conflict was necessary for the people to get where they were going in their minds and hearts – to understand the reality of the wide inclusivity of God. To challenge perceived 'rights' to God's blessings for themselves.

The humorous, but for real, modeling here is that sometimes, love is not nice. It is not about being happy but growing in being lovable with God and others. The giving and the receiving.

For all of us, love demands some courage. We risk as we agape love. It becomes about unconditional love that can let go of control, be patience, and bear weight - holding burden - or about the risk of being misunderstood as we speak truth with a capital T to each other – not opinions, not demands or standards, but simply truth.

Let us take these last couple of weeks of lectionary together. Let us show up, rebuild in between these waves of pandemic, and let us love with commitment to truth, connection to God, and participating in deep and wide inclusivity of the Kingdom.

Amen