

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church & Neighborhood House
Sunday, January 31, 2010 – The Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time



Wizard of Oz:

"As for you, my galvanized friend, you want a heart. You don't know how lucky you are not to have one. Hearts will never be practical until they can be made unbreakable."

Tin Woodsman:

"But I still want one."

Call to Worship

(Variation of opening verse of "Not for Tongues of Heaven's Angels")

One: Not for the tongues of heaven's angels,

Many: Not for wisdom to discern,

One: Not for faith that masters mountains; for this better gift we yearn

Many: May Love be ours, O God.

Many: Come, hearts and all, let us worship God together. Amen.

Call to Prayer: Let us come to prayer...

Unison Prayer:

(Variation: The Practicing The Power of Now by Eckhart Tolle p. 102)

When [we] surrender to what is
and so become fully present,
the past ceases to have any power.
The realm of Being, which had been obscured by
the mind, then opens up.
Suddenly, a great stillness arises within [us],
an unfathomable sense of peace.
and within that peace, there is great joy.
and within that joy, there is love.
And at the innermost core, there is the sacred,
the immeasurable, That which cannot be named
[That, at the same time, known by many names].

First Reading: 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.

Gospel Reading: 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.

One Heart to Find
©2010 Ray Bagnuolo

What can I tell you about love? More than that, what can I tell you that Paul knew of love?

Well, for that, we will go back to Corinth in Greece. The year is about 50-51 CE. Corinth bustles as the wealthiest and most important of all cities in Greece, benefiting from being a active shipping and trade mecca. Occupied by the Romans, it boasts up to 600,000 residents and two major ports.

On its shore rises the 800' promontory of Acrocorinth, site of the Temples of Isis, Necessity, and Demeter. On its summit stands the Temple of Aphrodite, symbolic of a free-wheeling society. It is the time and place of gods: Apollo, Athena, Poseidon, Dionysius, and more.

And chief among them was Aphrodite with 1,000 temple courtesans, dedicated to the goddess.

Corinth marks the place Paul remains for 18 months, his longest of stays on his evangelical road, working among the common classes; here he writes three of his most important letters' Thessalonians I & II and Romans.

If you've ever wondered how Paul did his evangelism; spreading the Good News; teaching people about "the way," it was fairly traditional. He arrives in a new location, finds the synagogue, enters it, and during the service proclaims that the Messiah for whom they were waiting has arrived.

You can imagine that gets peoples' attention.

Still, the Jews are not always a ready audience, but the Gentiles who are attracted to Judaism but unwilling to become proselytes quickly pick up on Paul's path, this "new way"— of Judaism. And Paul, who has been through many of the struggles with the early apostles of welcoming Gentiles into the fold, embraces these believers.

First Century Greece. An interesting place and Paul is not the only evangelist in Corinth, preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus the Christ. There are others or their, including Apollos, and early Alexandrian Jewish Christian and Cephas (Peter). Each has his own teachings and connection to Jesus. Cephas holds more closely to the tenets of Judaism and the Torah, while Paul moves more generously and inclusively to those outside of the Jewish faith. Apollos leans a bit more toward Gnosticism and knowledge to teach.

Speculation is that Paul writes his letters to Corinthians to address these and other divisions. “Parties” have formed and seem to be in competition. Paul argues that one party or another is not the answer and that this partisanship places individuals, apostles, in the place where Jesus alone should be. [He sounds like the Protestant in the group!]

Sounds a little familiar 2000 years later.

Many of the problems Paul deals with arise from the background of his followers rather than his teachings. Libertines who believe in sexual freedom, aesthetics who oppose marriage, citing its inherent sinfulness.

Conflicts abound over slaves and their freedom; the traditional and historical domination of women exerts its influence. Challenges over food laws and restrictions further divide communities between the old and the new. Even more, including issues over speaking in tongues and the physical resurrection of the dead create confusion, debates, and for Paul – a loss of vision on the part of the faithful.

This is the briefest of snapshots of Paul and his times. What is clear in Paul is that Jesus is the Christ. It is through Jesus that God is revealed. Living “in” Christ, in the way of Jesus, literally means that one becomes the Body of Christ.

But the question remains. How do we rise above the contention and the divisions?

For Paul, it is by living the Christian life – The Way of Love. The Love of which Paul speaks; the Love God gives to us – a love that we cannot return to God except in its expression to others. And this love is known through Jesus the Christ.

It is the agape love – not the “eros” I’m in love love; not the philia or Philadelphia and friendship love; but the agape – boundless love of God, demonstrated through Christ.

This is the central point of all of Paul: Christ Jesus revealed God; or put another way – God revealed Godself to us through Jesus. Jesus is the Messiah – the anointed one; the Son of God. And God is Love. Put your focus your live in this place of Jesus and God and Spirit.

God and Love is a melody, not the noisy gong or clanging symbol of pagan rituals, or the noise itself of glossalalia or speaking in tongues.

Without love, there is no melody to life – we are left with the basso ostinato, the stubborn driving bass beat that that never leaves the bottom of the spine.

In this first section of today's reading, Paul is out to establish the superiority of love – superiority over tongues (of human or angel), over prophetic powers, over knowledge, faith, and boast-based giving. All of these things, without love – is – nothing. Meaningless. It is without heart.

In the next section, we keep in mind that Love is God. So what is Paul actually says in verses 4 – 7? God – however you know God, for many of us known through Jesus, ...

God is patient
God is kind
God is not envious or boastful, arrogant or rude
God does not rejoice in wrongdoing
God rejoices in the truth
God bears all things
God believes [in the best of] all things
God hopes all things
God endures all things.

In other words, whatever we may think we do to God [if in fact we could “do” anything to God of our own power] God is unwavering, the All beyond anything we are capable of.

Remember some of the things we discussed earlier about the time, the struggles and strife, and the myths of the gods and their arrogant, vindictive, distant association with humankind. And think of these words describing the God revealed through Jesus that Paul speaks about. It had to have an awesome impact of those who were subject to the harshness of life and politics of the time. It had to give them a new sense of life, hope, love, heart.

And then, in the last section of the reading, vs. 8 – 13, Paul assures his listeners and readers that Love is permanent. Prophecy, tongues, knowledge...all these things diminish over time, but not Love, not God. It does not fail...

Love Is in the way of the I Am.

And, when we see clearly, it will not be in addition to what we know – it will be in a way that makes all things new again. We see dimly, we think unclearly, and when we do reach the glory and promise that awaits us it will be so full that what has been will simply be no more.

And how feeble is language to describe such things. We know these things not because of the meaning of words but because of the way the words open the heart that already holds this things deeply, long before we discover them.

Paul is forever the servant and he calls us to be the same in loving one another as God loves us, which by the way is greater than we understand – however wonderfully we understand such things.

And in our second reading we have a flashback, in a way, to this Jesus that Paul spoke of without ceasing.

The reading from Luke is based on the earliest version of the gospels of Mark. Jesus enters the synagogue and participates in worship. Early worship in the Palestinian synagogue consisted of first the Shema (a prayer), followed by a fixed lectionary reading from the Law, and a free reading from the Prophets. Then there would be a “sermon,” an application of one or both readings, followed by a blessing. Scripture was read in Hebrew and translated in Aramaic by an interpreter.

So, here is Jesus, in the temple.

[Parallel Bible Readings]

Mark and Matthew have no mention of the reading of Isaiah. And, the reference to Jesus saying the “no prophet is accepted in his home town” suggests that the event took place later in Jesus’ ministry.

But in relation to Paul’s writings in I Corinthians, Luke gives us some interesting juxtapositions confirming that Jesus began to break down the barriers that had turned God’s Love into the Law, and a poor observance of the Law, indeed. What is fascinating in this account of Luke is the parallel to Paul’s outreach to the Gentiles and others. Was this just Paul’s idea and way of growing more inclusive with time?

It appears not. From this passage, it appears that Jesus’ heart was already beating in the direction of others who were the marginalized and oppressed. Those who read Luke’s rendition of Jesus’ rebuke of the elders in the synagogue would have understood that the widow that was helped by Elijah, Zarephath in Sidon would have been an hated Syrophenician.

And, the reference to Naaman the Syrian would also have been a non-Jew. The growing body of work by the gospel writers, increasingly demonstrates Jesus’ ministry as reaching out to the non-Jewish populations, and affront the Temple mentality that limited their work just to the Jewish race, for the most part.

The opening line “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” A better translation might be “Today this Scripture that you have just heard has been fulfilled.” Meaning that the time is at hand, the kingdom of God is at hand, and we are embarking on this ministry and mission to let everyone know – if you want to

stay here and satisfy your own limited and selfish design for God's love among you, so be it.

In that light, the response that Luke speaks of could be understood. Although neither Mark nor Matthew refers to this confrontation in the same way, it is clear that the line had been drawn and that Jesus could be counted on to challenge the approach of the elders, which he saw as an aberration of the Law upon which they rested.

Throughout the readings of Paul and Luke, the decisive point is that we have been placed here to serve, to help, to love, and to let our hearts beat for others. Our own selfishness is like a chancre sore on our spirit: ugly, difficult to remove, painful to the touch, and of no use to others. Our parsing and use of Scripture to limit rights of others, slow down care for the poor or ill, undergird laws and actions that make it acceptable that nearly 1%, more than 2,000,000 people woke up this morning incarcerated – is wrong.

Along...the way...some of us have lost...our way...and fallen into the comfortable denial of blaming the victims for their own plight, marginalizing the least among us because it is too much effort to pick them up, and allowing people to continue with behaviors that hurt other, while we turn the other way.

We are called to be the reflective action of the Love of God given freely to us.

patient
kind
not envious or boastful, arrogant or rude
not rejoicing in wrongdoing
rejoicing in the truth
bears all things
believes [in the best of] all things
hopes all things
endures all things

As God does for us. That's the connection: God + Us = Service to others.

It means sacrifice of time, resources...

It means commitments to helping others...

It means taking the risk of standing up and speaking truth to those in and out of power...

It means that the basso ostinato of the clanging cymbals has turned into the collective beating of the one heart we share, the one we can only find in each other...

The heart of the Love of God...reaching out – demanding – that we love others.