

Sermons at Christ Church

Be One Body in Christ, Belonging to Each Other

Epiphany IV
The Reverend Emmanuel Mercer

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, and endures all things. Love never ends. Paul writes this as part of a broader appeal to a Corinthian church that was beset with division and dissent over the gifts that they have and the value of those gifts. With this letter, Paul draws the faithful Christians in Corinth away from all that was needlessly dividing them and consuming their time, efforts and resources, to the most important part of their Christian responsibility-which is to love.

Within the Corinthian community was a huge tension which was generated by the many gifts that by the grace of God each had been given- *To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.* The tension was not about the use of the gifts and more, but which of the gifts was more important, which one was of more value to the community of faith.

The gospel story recounts another tension in the synagogue. Jesus was in his hometown of Nazareth, and as was his custom, he went to the synagogue to worship. While in the synagogue, he read a text from the prophet Isaiah and then tells the worshippers that *“Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* Eyebrows are raised, people are amazed. What does he mean? Is he now a prophet? But in their amazement of all the wonderful things he said and did, they also derided him *“Is not this Joseph’s son?”* It was as if his lineage was to be an impediment to any extraordinary gift that he may have.

Jesus notices the insult and responds to it by referencing two important stories to highlight God's ever-widening embrace of people who were thought to be outside the bounds of God's healing love. Elijah was sent to the widow of Zarephath in Sidon when there were widows in Israel. Elisha healed Naaman the Syrian of his leprosy when there were lepers in Israel.

The point that Jesus sought to make was that God sends God's people to proclaim God's loving embrace to anyone and everywhere. God doesn't prioritize over who is deserving of God's love. God sends God's people to announce to all that they too are deserving of God's love.

If the Israelites thought that because of their relationship with God they were more important than everyone, or as some in the Corinthian Church thought that their gifts were of more value than others, Jesus reminds us that there are people like the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian. That no one particular person or gift is of more value than the other. The value of a gift or a person lies in their ability to use the gift to extend love. Anything short of that is as empty as the noise of a clanging symbol.

Remember this, it wasn't the case that the Jews sitting in the synagogue were more important than the widow or Naaman, nor was it the case that the widow and Naaman were of more value than those in the synagogue and their ancestors. What Jesus did was to reveal to them that the other, each of us is of equal value and importance to God. And that revelation alone was enough to set these people on fire-make them angry. The revelation that God's loving embrace touched different people who were not Jews was enough for the people in the synagogue to want to hurt Jesus.

Tensions, wherever they may be found often provide a reason for others to hurt other people. We don't have to go far to find those tensions within our own homes, our communities, our worship spaces, our schools. We fight over who has more value than the other. We fight over which and whose gift is better suited for our common life. We fight over whether the African American or people of color deserve a seat at the table and whether they deserve equal pay for equal work. Our society is saturated with tension because we have little patience for each other and little to no kindness to show each other. It only takes just one innocent act to blow things up. Everyone appears to be sitting on tenterhooks, simply waiting to overreact or explode. Why?

I read a story of two shoppers. One of them unknowingly and accidentally bumped into the other who was a male. This man became apoplectic and reacted as if something terribly wrong had happened. The woman who bumped into the man apologized profusely-it was an accident she pleaded. But the gentleman was so upset that he followed this woman to her house and shot her. Now, what in the world would make someone do that? How angry can you be over someone bumping into you? There's another story of a mother and her son who argued over food. Apparently, one of them was a vegan. The argument got so bad that the mother called the cops to their apartment.

On hearing that the mother had called the cops, and the cops were on their way, this man went to his room, and retrieved two guns, and at the first sighting of the cops, began to shoot. He got shot himself but he killed two young cops, one of whom was buried a couple of days ago. Now, what in the world would make a mother and a son argue over food to the extent that one felt threatened enough to call the cops?

These are but two symptoms of a somewhat broken society in which we live. They are but two examples of a much broader sickening problems within our society. You and I do not have to travel far to feel the tension within our democracy-because each wants to insist on its own way. We don't have to travel very far to feel the tension around our educational system-because we don't want to rejoice in the truth. We don't have to travel very far to feel the heat about race and racial issues-because we struggle with being kind, compassionate, just and fair. We don't have to travel far to experience the arrogance of those whose responsibility it is to serve. We don't have to travel very far to feel the effects of broken institutions which do not command as much trust as they used to.

Our society is beside itself with rage over tensions it cannot manage because like those in the synagogue, we refuse to hear that there are some who are as much deserving of God's loving embrace as we ourselves. We worry ourselves over whether another person's gifts or personhood diminishes ours or whether God's abundant love is enough for all of us. Yes, it is more than enough for all. The hope is that with your eyes widely opened, you will see it, embrace it and live it.

Paul sounds interesting when he says, when I was a child, I thought like a child, because I didn't have the capacity to think any different than a child-I didn't know much, if any at all. But when I

became an adult, when I got to know the full measure of God's love as breaking down boundaries and touching everyone, when my eyes were opened to know that God called me and put His word in my mouth, just as much as He has called you and put His word in your mouth, when I came to realize that God has given me a gift, just as much as he has given you a gift. When I began to see face to face, the fullness of a love the bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, I put away the childhood things, those things that diminish me, and I asked myself, if I can still hold on to the raw divisiveness that generates needless tension. I asked myself if I can affirm and celebrate the gift in myself and in each other. I asked myself if I can love.

God doesn't ask me to be faithful, if I cannot love. God doesn't ask me to be hopeful for a renewed world if I cannot love. God doesn't require of me to offer anything, even my body, if I cannot love. God doesn't ask me to serve my neighbor if I cannot love. God doesn't ask me to believe if I cannot love.

Love is patient-are you patient? Love is kind-are you kind? Love does not insist on its own way-do you insist on your way or the highway? Love rejoices in the truth-do you rejoice in the truth?

As you can tell, love isn't an expensive commodity nor is it tasking. It is for the willing heart. So this morning, for the sake of yourself and the community in which you live, may you focus on the things that matter, the things that bring and bind people together. May you pursue love, not randomly, but consistently for there is no fear in the love that never ends.

Amen.

