

## Faith, Hope, and Love Abide

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

16th Sunday after Pentecost - September 12, 2021

Texts: 1 Corinthians 13:4-13, Mark 9:14-29

### SCRIPTURE READING 1 Corinthians 13:4-13

*Paul rarely writes about children as such; but in this familiar passage, frequently heard at weddings, he uses childhood as a metaphor for spiritual immaturity. All of us, including Paul himself, have room to grow in faith, hope, and love.*

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; <sup>6</sup>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 Mark 9:14-29

*Jesus and his three closest friends, Peter, James and John, have just come down the mountain where Jesus shone with light. There they heard the voice of God from a cloud: "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him." When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are able! —All things can be done for the one who believes."*

Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer."

It's back-to-school time, and about time, too. One more truth covid has brought to light is just how important classroom education is, not just for learning, but for kids' emotional wellbeing. What ensures safety for the health and happiness of our children, our future?

For some, school isn't a safe place: those who bear the brunt of bullying for whatever reason, whether gender identity, or differing abilities, or ethnic origin. One of the saddest pieces of the 9/11 remembrances this week has been hearing how even Muslim children were labeled terrorists and tormented by classmates.

For me, school was the safest of places. Back-to-school meant new books, new ideas, new friends. A new outfit! But one child in our neighborhood didn't go back to school with the rest of us: Billy White. He was older than me, so I didn't really know him. But I found out about him in the Ben Franklin store where my family was shopping. My mother, in a panicky voice, called me over to her. She explained later: Billy was behind me; she was afraid he was going to fall on me. You see, Billy had seizures, the result of a traumatic brain injury. My mother's fear infected me for years, until I met friends who also suffered from seizures, and who were perfectly delightful people leading normal lives, with proper medication. Billy eventually lived out his days in an institution somewhere. Maybe his seizures were too severe to be treated; and I don't blame my mother for trying to protect me, but I wish I had learned about him in another way.

The child in today's gospel reading is thought to have the same condition as Billy. The people around him labeled him as possessed by an unclean spirit. It's something like the case of Lia Lee, the child of Hmong parents who fled Laos after the end of the VietNam War. Lia Lee suffered from epilepsy from an early age. The culture clash between her Hmong community, who saw her sickness as spiritual, and the Western medical community, is told in the book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*.<sup>1</sup> After massive seizures at the age of four left her braindead, the family continued to care for her tenderly. She lived to be 30, far beyond the expected lifespan of someone in a vegetative state. How dearly they loved her!

“Now faith, hope, and love abide. But the greatest of these is love.”

Consider for a moment what parenthood means. To bring a child into the world at all is an act of faith. You've heard the Carl Sandberg quote that my friend hung above her infant daughter's crib: “A baby is God's opinion that the world should go on.” To commit to being a parent amounts to signing on to the hope that their life will be worth living, that the earth will be a hospitable place for them to work and play and, perhaps, have children of their own. Faith and hope define parenting. But love goes even farther. Love says to the child, “I'm sticking by you,

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 1997; now used as a textbook in many medical schools. Analysis from the NYT article by Margalit Fox, September 15, 2012, “Lia Lee Dies.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/15/us/life-went-on-around-her-redefining-care-by-bridging-a-divide.html>

come what may. You are more precious to me than life itself. Our lives are bound together, and nothing can separate us.”

The father in the gospel story had all three: hope that his child could be healed and faith that reached beyond himself; he cried out: “I believe; help my unbelief.” And love that saw his child as part of himself: “Have pity on *us*,” he pleads, “Help *us*.” Not just “my boy, my child,” but *us*. Help one and you help us both.

His words and actions echo God’s words to Jesus on the mountaintop: “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him,” implying, “as you would listen to me.” As Jesus said elsewhere, “I and the Father are one.”

Love unites more than parent and child; love unites a group of people in a common need, and love unites us with God. Love is the binding, strengthening, healing force in our world. Last week, we heard how a Syrian woman, an outsider, sought Jesus out for healing for her daughter. As far as we know, she was all alone. She challenged Jesus, teaching *him* that not only does God’s love transcend race, gender, or status - God loves each child as though she were the only one. But we live in a world so much bigger than this, too. We live in an infinite web of relationships, far and near. We participate in the goodness that is God’s love for the world.

Lia Lee’s story is more like the boy’s in our gospel lesson than like Billy’s. Both Hmong and Jewish communities saw the illness as spiritual in nature. Both communities rallied around the sick child and the desperate parents. A whole crowd of awe-struck people dashed toward Jesus, adding commentary and corroboration to the father’s words of woe. I’m not saying Billy White’s parents didn’t love him; I’m sure they loved him dearly. But if my mother was any indication, the community didn’t exactly support them in their care for him. That was our loss.

Jesus helped and healed the father and the son and the entire community through his actions when the disciples could not; he tells them, “This kind can only come out through prayer.”

So what does that mean? We’ve all prayed for someone sick who didn’t get better. Billy White’s parents were devout Catholics, Lia Lee’s parents faithful practitioners of their traditional Hmong religion.

I think by prayer Jesus means sitting still long enough to absorb the truth that we all exist within God, and God within us. To pray is to participate in the faith, hope, and love that are the very life of God. I cannot believe that human beings are born bad and some born worse than others; all

are made in God's image, and that means good. "We are made out of the faith, hope, and love of God—to increase faith, hope, and love in this world."<sup>2</sup> To know and do this is prayer.

Every action rooted in love is sacred, whether the person doing the loving is Christian, Muslim, Hmong, or "none." All of us are connected in ways we don't comprehend and can't even imagine. But we can act as if we believe that the love we live can help heal the lives of others everywhere, even when a cure is not possible. And we can pray, "I believe. Help my unbelief."

In some ways, the world has changed. Gun violence and coronavirus threaten the safety of our schools and children. If there is anything we can do to protect those innocent souls, why in heaven's name would we fail to do it? In other ways, the world never changes. Evil exists and always has. But it doesn't have the last word.

For faith, hope, and love abide. But the greatest of these is love.

**Prayers:**

God of all, we thank you for the children in our lives who teach us how to love, who give us hope for the future, who have faith in us to keep them safe in a hazardous world. \

On this 20th anniversary of 9/11, we remember those who lost their lives that day, and those who gave them freely in our defense. We give thanks for the common bonds that united us following the attacks, and pray that we may learn from the mistakes that were made.

As we continue to battle a disease that knows no boundaries, may we understand ourselves as citizens of more than one nation, but of a common humanity. Remind us of our interbeing, so that when we pray it is not for those near to us only, but for all on earth.

Yet we thank you that you have given some who are especially near and dear into our care, and we pray for them by name aloud, or in the quiet of our hearts: Those who travel; those who are ill, those who are troubled or burdened by life, and for all who mourn. May they be comforted.

All these things we ask as we abide in the faith, hope, and love that you are; may this be our prayer, as we share the words Jesus taught us: Our Father, who art in heaven....

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr, Daily Devotion, Monday, September 6, 2021.  
<https://cac.org/participating-in-original-goodness-2021-09-06/>

