

## A Gift Too Generous

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany - January 30, 2022

Texts: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

### SCRIPTURE 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. So we have these three great gifts: faith, hope and love. And the greatest gift of all is love.

### GOSPEL READING Luke 4:21-30

*Last week, people who had known Jesus from infancy were amazed to hear him proclaim the fulfillment of God's promises made to Isaiah centuries before. Instantly, their awe turns to rage. Why?*

Jesus began to say to the people of his hometown of Nazareth, "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. Holy Wisdom, Holy Word. TBTG

I *preach* a God of mercy and forgiveness, a God of universal love. I would like to live up to my own words. I would like to live the language of 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter: words we know so well from all the weddings we've attended. But when I'm hurt, I'm much more likely to be like the people in Jesus' hometown, ready to push someone off a convenient cliff. But why, I ask over and over, why did *they* get so angry *at him*? Was it just because he told them what they were thinking? I hate for anyone to tell me what I think or how I feel. Especially when they're right. I hate having my prejudice exposed, or the "me and mine first" attitude I've been hiding while pretending to love everyone.

Last week we heard how Jesus' preaching debut wowed his hometown congregation. That's natural. We cheer for the home team, and the native son or daughter who makes good. We're proud of them so we congratulate ourselves: yes, we produced this prodigy! And we get possessive: Yup, he's *our* quarterback, not the Packers' or the Buffalo Bills'. He's one of us, part of our tribe. We share an identity, we know who's us and who's them, who's in, who's out. We read the same Facebook posts. We're stuck in the same algorithm loop, we hear the same news. We're solid. And we're in a cell of our own making.

The people of Nazareth loved Jesus when he was their tame prophet. They liked how he told them he would fulfill Isaiah's promises of good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, the year of the Lord's favor. They knew those words well; didn't they deserve all those things? They even knew the part he left out: "To proclaim the day of vengeance of our God." What! No revenge? Was that when they changed their minds about Jesus? Their real bondage was that they were locked in a prison of "us and them," that feedback



loop that made them right and righteous and the rest of the world wrong and dangerous. Their blindness was in failing to see that all people are part of the same tribe, and beloved by God, and *that* blindness Jesus couldn't just *heal*. He had to show them. When Jesus reminded them that God's love knows no boundaries, they were filled with rage. His love was too generous for them.

God's love is too generous for me. And that makes me mad. It shows

me the truth about myself. When someone I love is threatened, my love for the other dies an instant death. This happened to me recently: when my sister's home was broken into by a distant acquaintance with a history of violence. My sister wasn't home. But she might have been. My memory jumped to my friend whose father was beaten to death in his own home. That didn't happen to my sister. Not even close. Thank God. But if it had, and you gently invited me to show some understanding for that man who hurt my sister, and his own sad history and wounded life, I would probably throw you off the nearest cliff. Jesus reminded his hometown tribe that God's love extended to their traditional enemies. People with a history of hurting them. Love, as God does love, is a gift too generous for most of us.

It's no accident that our Sunday readings paired this text with the "love" chapter. Reading the two together reminds us love is not an emotion but a decision, that it is not a general feeling of benevolence that depends on tribal identity or the mood of the moment or the absence of conflict. But neither does true love dictate that you passively throw open your borders to welcome the armies massing there. True love doesn't advise the beaten down spouse to put up and shut up. True love doesn't caution victims of racism to suffer in silence. True love calls out illegal domination. True love puts itself beyond the abuser's reach. True love streams the video of the knee on the neck. True love rejoices in truth and in justice. Because the despot and the domestic tyrant and the white supremacist are all really just locked in their own prisons of fear - and fear is the



enemy of love. When we look at the other and see their fear manifesting as threat, *we* feel fear. But true love casts out fear. True love liberates without violence. "Love is our instrument and our weapon, our only one."<sup>1</sup> But is it even humanly possible to wield this weapon of love? The stakes are so high and our hearts are so wounded, and nearly everything we read and hear fans the flames of difference, and exaggerates the threat. Love is a gift too generous for us to grasp or use on our own.



God's love is more generous than ours can ever be. Jesus truly loved his hometown folks and saved them from harming him by passing through their midst. *By passing through their midst.* And so he passes through our midst today: passes through the midst of the Russian soldiers at the Ukrainian

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<sup>1</sup> I am quite sure that I read this as a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. but I cannot find the source.

border, and passes through the courtroom in St. Paul where the details of a terrible act of violence are recounted once again. And passes through your hearts, offering you a love too generous to comprehend. But you can receive it, and when you are able to receive it, you will be able to pass it on. Listen:

God is love, therefore:

God is patient; God is kind;

God is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

God does not insist on God's own way but leaves you free to make mistakes;

God is not irritable or resentful when you mess up yet again;

God does not rejoice in any wrongdoing,  
but rejoices in the truth.

And still God bears all things, believes all things,

hopes all things, endures all things.

God offers God's own self as the gift of love for you. Now and forever. Can you receive it?

Amen. Thanks be to God.

### **Prayers**

Take a moment in silence to ask God, "Who are you guiding me to pray for today? No matter how unexpected that group or person, help me do so sincerely."

Mother of Wisdom, open our ears to what the truth-tellers closest to us are trying to tell us that we don't want to hear? We give thanks for our defensiveness; it means someone has struck truth. Give us wisdom to listen, courage to hear, humility to accept, and grace to change.

Give us compassion for those who have come from around the world to our little town to receive hope and healing here, whether at the clinic, or resettling as refugees. Bring relief to all who suffer everywhere: too many to name, but each one encompassed by your love.

We offer you, too, those closest to our hearts. Though you love all, you have given these to us to love and tend on our journey together. So remember us in your community of love and teach us to pray, "Our Father and Mother in heaven,..."