



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

306 N. Division Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104 • (734) 663-0518 • www.standrewsaa.org

Sermon for Sunday, February 3, 2019

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

DONNA WESSEL WALKER

Jeremiah 1:4-10 | Psalm 71:1-6 | I Corinthians 13:1-13 | Luke 4:21-30

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts together be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our redeemer.

Love, love, love. We hear a lot about it; we talk a lot about it; we sing a lot about it. It's the main theme of most of our songs, operas, poems and novels. Anthony Trollope, who wrote some 47 novels in the 19c, once set out to write a novel without a love story in it, but even he couldn't do that. And romantic love isn't the whole of it, either, as we well know. There's mother love, shared by tigers and bears as well as human beings: the most dangerous place to stand is between a mother and her cubs. There is friendship love, that deep, shared companionship of those who have common interests and history. There is the love we have for the non-human world: not only our pets, but the places we treasure and want to protect. This suggests that love is central to human life. So why, then, do we ignore or disparage the power of love when we engage with the systems of power in this world? Can you imagine what would happen if a senator said in a speech that love needed to be either the motivation or the measure of any piece of legislation? If a CEO announced that a new labor policy was born of love for the company's workers, we might rejoice in a better policy (if it was better) but we would look for benefit to the company's bottom line for the reason, not to any actual commitment to the workers. We do not expect love to be sufficient to bring about peace between Israel and the Palestinians, or in Venezuela, or in our own cities. We know that love is an incredibly powerful and profound force shaping our lives, but we wouldn't trust anyone who wanted to base policy on it.

Why is that? Is it because we've allowed ourselves to be hoodwinked into minimizing love to the level of a greeting card? Are we misled by soft-focus landscapes or sentimental verses into thinking that love is a soft thing having to do only with our private relations? Are we beguiled by sweetness and swayed by sentimentality? Some of those greeting cards even quote the great "love chapter" we just read as though Paul were writing pious platitudes. But I don't think Paul had in mind sentimental twaddle when he called the Corinthians to consider a higher way and wrote this description of what love is.

Paul talks about love not as a feeling but as a set of actions: actions that build attitudes that create a whole approach to life. He uses fifteen active verbs in the first 9 verses of this chapter, pretty evenly divided between what love does and what love does not do. He expresses no interest in what love feels or doesn't feel: he wants us to know what love does. As one commentator put it, "This kind of love is an up-at-dawn, feet on the ground, tools in hand, working kind of love. It builds communities." It is the kind of action that you can see in the new Episcopal News Service video series, "Traveling the Way of Love." The first video, just released, features the Bishop Walker school in one of the most underserved areas of Washington, D.C; in it you'll see why it's called "Bless." Now, back to our text.

Paul defines love for the Corinthians not because they already had a closeknit, mutually dependent fellowship with each other. Far from it. The Corinthians were a community at odds with itself, sometimes in open conflict. They were a diverse group in terms of social class, economic status, and racial and religious backgrounds: there were slaves and rulers, rich and poor, and Gentiles and Jews in the Christian community at Corinth. But they had not reconciled those differences: there were cliques and name-calling, gossip and lawsuits, and bragging about status, even the status accorded by spiritual gifts. This "love" chapter is wedged between two discussions about the role of the individual believer in the community: the previous chapter 12 warns individuals neither to discount their own gifts nor to disparage the gifts of others but to treasure them all for the group; the next chapter 14 instructs members on best practices for exercising their individual gifts for the good of the whole. These chapters describe love in action. The Corinthians were not people to whom these things came naturally: they needed instruction and encouragement to follow that teaching. Love, says Paul, is patience when you're bored or frustrated; kindness when you're mad or fed up. Paul has to tell the Corinthians (and us) that love doesn't boast and isn't jealous because they (and we) are either boasting about what we have or jealous about what we don't have. Love isn't pushy or irritable or resentful or rude: we are all those things, and need to be made over in love. Love is thinking about and serving the needs of others. We need to stop being childish, stop acting like the world revolves around us,

and grow into a life where we know and are known, where we love and are loved.

The beauty of it is, says Paul, that love is permanent. All those things we cling to, that we boast about or resent others for—they'll all disappear. The pursuit of love is the pursuit of the eternal: love is the goal and the purpose of all our lives, for it is love that will, in the end, complete and enfold us. It is this telos of love that enables us to face life's bitter truths and harsh realities in the here and now.

Love in the here and now isn't about--can't afford to be about--sweetness or being nice. Love's gentleness is firm in purpose and strong in action. Sometimes it's not even polite. Jesus wasn't particularly polite in the first sermon he gave at his hometown of Nazareth. This story is the second half of the story we started last week. You'll remember that while Jesus was home he went to synagogue and, perhaps remembering the encouragement God had given Jeremiah, opened the scroll to Isaiah, read that fantastic passage of liberation and said "today this has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Everybody in that room is thrilled: who wouldn't be? Imagine yourself sitting there, hearing that God's long-promised deliverance was about to happen. Even better: we're in the story. This is about to happen in our town, led by one of our own boys. That is going to be amazing!

But amazement can lead in two directions. It can mean: "Yippee! Our boy is doing great things. Bring it home for us, Jesus!" Or, the amazement can be skeptical, grounded in the lived experience of those who grew up with Jesus: "Wait a minute: isn't this Joseph's kid? I remember when he was little! Who does he think he is? He's no better than my kid! He's no better than me!" Both reactions are focused on us and our kind. Everyone in this story thinks they know better than Jesus or wants to control what he does and how he does it. It is the epitome of privilege to think that when God starts to act it will be in our own town, on our own behalf, for our own benefit. It is the epitome of arrogance to think we know better than God's messiah.

Jesus anticipates both reactions and to both he says "Nope." To the belittlers and skeptics he says, "You want to reduce me to your level and say that I need to heal my own problems before I take on yours. But--no." To those who are excited to have Jesus on the home team, he points out that the great prophets Elijah and Elisha did not heal their own: they went outside Israel to Sidon and to Syria. Jesus is launching his ministry here in Nazareth but he is taking it, both physically and spiritually, out to the whole world. Jesus is not proclaiming the victory of Nazareth: he is proclaiming the reign of God for everyone.

That makes people mad. They're not able to open themselves to Jesus as he moves beyond the confines of their expectations. They're caught up in the melee of their desires, their insularity, and their prejudices. Jesus leaves them in the maelstrom they've created: they're so caught up in themselves they don't even notice him getting away. Jesus walks through their midst, not disappearing magically, but moving with the firm purpose of love, heading out to embody the way of love and to bring it to all who will receive it. That way will not be easy or painless: Jesus is not riding off into a happy sunset here. This is not the ending, but the beginning. The way ahead is full of danger, suffering, and death; but it is also, for Jesus and for us, the way of love, which is the power of life and hope for the world.

Amen.