

First Trinity Lutheran Church
January 28, 2007
Jeremiah 1:4 - 10
1 Corinthians 13:1 - 13
Luke 4:21 – 30

In Love Everyone is Welcome

When I work with couples who are about to get married I usually spend six month to a year in pre-marital counseling with them. In some cases by the time of the wedding they sick of me. The last two meeting I have with a couple is the planning of the wedding ceremony itself. Well today we have this reading from 1 Corinthians. These words comprise a wonderful, beautiful, lyrical hymn of love and in their context they provide a powerful statement concerning how members of the Body of Christ should treat one another. This text is the one text that is used over and over again at weddings. Each time a couple wants to get married I work with them to select scripture reading and I prepare a list of appropriate Scripture passages to be read at their wedding worship service. Inevitably they pick 1 Corinthians 13, because it's so nice my cousin had it at her wedding, it mentions love.... I have tried leaving it off of my list of appropriate Scriptures, but it surfaces anyway, "Isn't their some passage about love and cymbals and children and mountains somewhere in the Bible?" It doesn't matter that I seize this opportunity for scholarly Bible study and faith development, citing the context of these words. "That's the one we want."

This is a magnificent passage of scripture. These words are more than sweet sentiments that wish well to a couple embarking on the journey of marriage in Christ. These words are a powerful challenge to a congregation at war with each other. Which is why Paul wrote this to the church in Corinth. When we examine these words in their context, not cut out of the chapter and pasted naked into the bulletin, we see the most critical challenge to the church of Corinth - LOVE.

This love is not the love between sexual partners (eros), nor is it the generic love of friendship (filos). This love is the deep sacrificial love demonstrated by Jesus on the cross. This is agape. This love is laying down one's life for the benefit of another.

Agape is the word Jesus uses when he speaks about loving God - it's a total commitment. Agape is the word that Jesus uses to describe loving your neighbor - it's unconditional. Agape is the word Jesus uses to challenge us to love our enemies - it's no strings attached. For Jesus, this agape love is not an option; it's a way of life.

The church in Corinth was a mess. Perhaps that's why Paul wrote to them so often. Their members were rough and tough. Corinth was a seaport and the people there were not gentle folk. They were sailors and merchants and ladies of the evening. They were people from many parts of the world. Some followed the call of Jesus. Others ignored Jesus words, preferring their own ways. Some joined the church, but didn't want to give up their old ways - they like the way they lived before, why change?

And they liked to fight. They fought about Communion. They fought about who was the most important authority in the church. They fought about whether they could eat the prime cuts of meat that had been offered to idols. They fought about giving benevolence dollars to the people in Macedonia. They fought about whether Paul knew what he was talking about and who did he think he was anyway? They fought about whether they should get married or not. They fought about whether you could be a follower of Jesus and not speak in the tongues of angels.

Paul calls them to stop fighting. Paul writes to them about "the still more excellent way" - agape. Paul challenges them to put away their arrogance and pride and put on the love of Christ, agape. Paul tells them to stop their envy and boasting about who is better or more important and take up the way of love - agape. Don't be rude, irritable or keep track of everybody else's sins. Be patient, and happy with the truth. Stop behaving like children, grow up! Never stop loving one another, because that's what the followers of Jesus do!

Paul does far more than just list love as one of the many gifts of the Holy Spirit. Paul calls love - agape - the more excellent way. In fact, Paul states that without agape all of the spiritual gifts are worthless. The gifts of speech and knowledge, service and martyrdom are wasted if agape is not behind them.

Erich Fromm, the noted psychologist and author of *The Art of Loving*, once said that love is the most discussed and least understood subject on earth. People talk about it, write poetry about it, sing about it, tell stories about it, and understand it less than any other subject. The people of God are no exception to this observation. These words from Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 should not make us comfortable. They should make us uneasy deep in our soul, because the most important thing about being a Christian is the most difficult and demanding. Paul was not writing about a wedding. Paul was writing about the very foundation of faith in Christ and Christian living, without agape, you're wasting your time and God's.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer was once asked to name the greatest person in the world. He replied, "The greatest person in the world is some unknown individual in some obscure corner of the earth who at this very hour has gone in love to be with another person in need."

A group of soldiers were released from a prison camp at the end of World War II. Transportation was limited. Bad weather threatened to cut off the port. The remaining soldiers waiting to board the last boat were told they could bring but one piece of luggage on board. Two of these soldiers had been together throughout the war and watched over each other for their time together. When one was selected to go and the other forced to stay behind for a later boat, the first man turned over his duffel bag and emptied its contents onto the ground. He then told his friend to climb into the duffel bag, lifted the bag onto his shoulder and carried his most important item of luggage onto the departing ship. That's agape in action.

Jesus said it. Paul echoed it. Love - agape - is what the kingdom of God is about. A story is told of a church consultant who asked the Congregation Council of a struggling parish what impact there would be on their community if they closed their doors. After some significant time of

introspection one of the council members said, "I guess the Boy Scouts will have to find another place to meet." If that's it then something is missing. Something's missing in those pews – agape.

This morning we have titled the theme for today One light, Many Welcomed. In our reading from Luke chapter 4 Jesus points out that God sent Elijah not to the Hebrews but to the widow at Zarephath. Then Jesus tells them that there were many lepers in Israel at the time of Elisha but none of them were healed except for Naaman the Syrian. This is the real reason why the people in the synagogue got angry because Jesus welcomed, healed, and supported all people not just the Hebrews. So when the Jews heard this they got angry and even Jesus was no longer welcomed.

This Sunday we welcome First Church. At this point they are strangers to us, but we want to welcome them with love. Agape Love. They bring with them a following, homeless people who have found that through their church and the Dinner Program for Homeless Women this is the place where they can get a warm meal and love. Something they don't get on the streets. We are not strangers to the homeless but in this case our church will now be home to hundreds more each day. We welcome them with love. We welcome all those who have been rejected by others, the addicted, the mentally ill and challenged, those who are divorced, those who are gay and lesbian, and transgendered. All are to be surrounded in this place with welcome and love.

This might not make all of us comfortable and safe and it certainly will not be easy. As a matter of fact it can be down right difficult at times. But let no one ever say of us, we did not give love and provide welcome to everyone. Amen