

Hespeler, 3 February, 2019 © Scott McAndless

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

Of all the passages in the entire Bible, the one we read this morning has got to be one of the most famous. Almost all of the time when I meet with a couple who are planning their wedding, it is their very first choice of a passage that they want to have read. And you can certainly understand why. It offers a description of the kind of love you are going to need to support and sustain a marriage through good times and bad times. It is so perfect. It so beautifully describes what it was that brought these two people together and to the place where they are willing to commit to each other to such depths that it is almost a shame to have to explain that that is not actually what it is about.

Oh, the description of love applies to marriage and if we really did all love each other in our marriages in the way that it describes, it would certainly help a lot to make marriages better and stronger, but that was not why the passage was written; Paul had something quite different in mind.

In fact, what we read is not actually what Paul wrote. I mean, all of the words are his and what we read is a good translation. It is just that our lectionary reading this morning left out a few words – words that kind of change the entire meaning. You see, Paul’s great reflection on the nature of love in 1st Corinthians 13 doesn’t begin with the first verse of chapter 13. It begins with the last few words of chapter 12 which are, **“And I will show you a still more excellent way.”**

That means that you cannot truly understand what Paul is describing in chapter 13 until you understand what it is better than. And when you understand that, you realize that the love he is talking about has a very particular purpose. Basically, what Paul is saying that love is better than is just about everything he has talked about in his letter up until this point.

1 Corinthians is a letter written to a particular church in a particular situation. Unlike every other church in the history of the world, the church in Corinth had problems, big problems. Specifically, it had people who didn’t get along with each other because they thought that they were better or more important than others. I know it’s hard for us to imagine that sort of thing happening in a church, but it actually kind of makes sense.

You see, in the church we deal with ultimate concerns – ideas and concepts that are more important than anything else. Let me point you at our reading this morning from the Book of Jeremiah to give you a sense of what I’m talking about. In this passage, God is



calling Jeremiah to be his prophet, to announce his word to the nation of Judah and to the world. And initially Jeremiah is a little bit hesitant. He doesn't think that he can do the job. **"Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy,"** he says.

But God doesn't accept that excuse. God says, it doesn't matter who you are or what you have done because I have chosen you: **"Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you."** What is important is that Jeremiah live up to the awesome task and responsibility that he has been given. **"See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."**

The thing that really strikes me about this passage is the awesome power and responsibility that God gives to Jeremiah despite his youth and lack of knowledge. Because God has chosen him, he can claim extraordinary authority and power. But the even more amazing thing is that Jeremiah is not the only one. I believe that every follower of Christ can claim the same authority and power. We also have been chosen by God.

According to traditional Presbyterian teaching we were also predestined from before birth, maybe even before the beginning of time, to take our place in the kingdom of Christ even though we did not know it. I don't think we often realize this, but it means that we are God's special agents and, like Jeremiah, we are set apart to bring hope, goodness and justice to this world.

I know that you might react to that idea by saying, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to do that, for I am only a kid, spiritually speaking," but that is how God sees us and what God has called us to be. And, as such, God offers us a lot of authority and power, even if we choose not to use it. We have a lot in common with Jeremiah because we are called, in the church, to deal with matters of ultimate importance.

But that was exactly the root of all the problems in Corinth and often in our churches too. You see, when people recognize that the matters that they are dealing with are of ultimate importance – when we are talking about what is true, what is just and what is good – that sense of awesome responsibility can have the effect of destroying our community.

We recognize that the stakes are high, and so our natural inclination is not to back down, to be insistent on our own interpretations and understanding. It has the natural effect of making us intolerant of other understandings and approaches. This is just a natural way that we as human beings react to an understanding that we are dealing in things of ultimate importance. It is actually a reflection of the importance of the work and the proclamation of the Christian church.

So that was what was going on in the church in Corinth that Paul was writing to. Different people had different ideas of what it meant to be a good

Christian and they were putting others down who didn't approach it in the same way. And, yes, it is something that we also do at times.

So that is what Paul is talking about when he points the Corinthians and us towards a more excellent way. He is not denying, indeed he is strongly affirming, the importance of the things that we deal with in the life of the church. He is affirming that your understanding of ethics and morality really matters and that mine matters too, even if it's not exactly the same as yours. He's affirming that your experience of God is of vital importance even if your experience doesn't jive with mine. It is all important; it is all meaningful. But it is only going to work, and we will only find the true excellence that we are called to in Christ, when we allow love to reign over all.

What Paul is saying in this passage is that we must apply 1st Corinthians 13 to our every interaction in the life of the church. Are there two people in the church who disagree about how a certain program in the life of the church should be run? That is good. The things that we do matter a great deal and if you have a different opinion that ought to be shared. What Paul is saying is, while we have that discussion, it must always be made more excellent through love.

Just think how excellent we could be together if, in every discussion and interaction, before you spoke or acted you were to hold up the next thing you were about to do and compare it to 1st Corinthians 13. In every interaction you would be forced to ask yourself, does what I'm about to do show patience and kindness? Is there anything behind it that comes from envy or boastfulness or arrogance? Am I being rude? Is this just about me getting own way and am I being irritable or resentful? Above all, am I finding my joy in the right things, not in wrongdoing but in what is true? Will I bear, believe, hope and endure all things?

Now those are not easy questions for anybody to ask of themselves; they are the kinds of question that demand that you examine yourself and understand what is really driving your actions. But if every one of us asked those kinds of questions before we acted in the life of the church, I really do think that we would begin to grasp the excellence that we are called to live out.

But often we get this all backwards. When there is a difference of opinion, when one person's sense of what is vital to the church is different from somebody else's, we don't respond with love. Sometimes, of course, we just fight it out because we think that we have to win and, therefore that the other person has to lose. But the more excellent way knows that it cannot be just about winning and getting your own way. Love sees beyond winning and losing.

Of course, we don't always fight it out openly in the church. In fact, I often find that we are more likely to just try to avoid the subject we disagree

about and not talk about it. Sometimes we pretend that it isn't there at all. I know that that might feel like the loving thing to do because we are avoiding the conflict, but actually it is not. That is a reaction based on fear, which is the opposite of love. **“Perfect love casts out fear.”** (1 John 4:8) When we seek that more excellent way, we will not hesitate to engage the other person even when we are in conflict, even when we have differences, and love shows us how we can really listen to one another and find that way through.

You see, because we deal in ultimate concerns, because the things that we talk about and work towards are the most important concerns of all for this world, the church can very easily become a pretty miserable place where everyone becomes convinced that their ways of doing the most important things and engaging in the faith and pursuing Christ are the only ways to think about such things and the only way to do them. The stakes are so high in what we do in the church that people can very easily fall into those kinds of patterns of behaviour. Basically the work of the church is so important that we can tear each other apart in our pursuit of it. That was what was going on in the church in Corinth and it can too easily happen in most any church. That is why Paul explains the more excellent way to us, why he urges us to follow in that way.

And the good news is that we are capable of following in that way because the love that Paul describes in his letter to the Corinthians is not merely human love. It is the perfect love of God, the love that we can only grasp because it has been so powerfully demonstrated to us in the person of Jesus Christ – in his life and in his death. Because the church is the body of Christ (an idea that Paul has just finished laying out in his letter), such love is available to the church – we can love in that way because we are empowered to do so by Christ himself. God has given us the ability to walk in the more excellent way. Now, let us choose to do so.

And I would like to leave with you and me and all of us a reminder that that is what we are called to do in all of our interactions in the church. I want each one of you to take one of these cards and refer to it often – especially when you are doing anything connected to the life of this congregation.

1 Corinthians 13
It was written to apply to all of our interactions in the church. So...

Before you act or speak in the church, ask:

Does this show patience and kindness?
Is there anything behind it that comes from envy or boastfulness or arrogance?

Am I being rude?

Is this just about me getting my way and am I being intitle or resentful?

Am I finding my joy in the right things, not in wrongdoing but in what is true?

Will I bear, believe, hope and endure all things?