

Luke 4:21-30 Bill Uetricht 1.30.25 4 Epiphany

In light of everything that is happening in our country right now, I am not going to touch with a ten-foot pole the reading about Jeremiah who is said to be called to “pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow,” or the gospel reading that highlights the importance of foreigners. I suspect that these readings could be very controversial. So, I think I am going to cling to Paul in First Corinthians. I mean, what could be controversial about love.

First Corinthians thirteen is one of the best-known passages in the Bible. Many people want to have it read at their weddings. It is just so sweet. You could cut it out of the Bible, and it could just stand on its own. It has a beauty of its own. Bill Loader says that this poetry, separated out from the rest of the whole first letter to the Corinthians, “is like an autumn leaf fallen from the tree.”

“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. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful.” Oh, this is such good stuff, such beautiful poetry. It makes me feel good. I’ll bet it makes you feel good, too. Unlike the texts from Jeremiah or Luke, these words affirm me, or if not affirm me, inspire me, warm me, touch me, certainly not unsettle me. I can see two lovers gathered in the front of the sanctuary, so much in love, so ready to hear words that cause tingles to go up and down their spines. And if the tingles aren’t going down their spines, they are probably going up and down our spines. We all want to believe in love, and we want to see it. And First Corinthians 13 just feels so good.

Luke and Jeremiah don’t feel so good. Therefore, I am going to stick with this wonderful text from Paul. I won’t offend anyone, unsettle anyone with it. How could love unsettle or offend?

Well, it's a good question. What do you mean that it probably isn't wise to look at this gem of a chapter independent of the rest of the book? Come on! I was feeling pretty good. I am a people pleaser. I don't want to say anything controversial. What do you mean that Paul's words are controversial? How can love be controversial?

In the case of Paul, it is. If you look at what comes before First Corinthians thirteen, or if you remember what we heard last week, you'll see and you'll recall that Paul has been talking about gifts in the church, the variety of gifts, and the significance of *all* the gifts. Everyone is gifted, and no one gift is more important than the other, Paul has said. And I suspect that he is not just saying this for mere philosophical reasons.

Something is going on in the Corinthian church that is causing him to say what he is saying. Evidently, people in the Corinthian church are ranking their gifts. Some people are saying, "We speak in tongues," fancy unknown spiritual languages. Others are saying, "We speak prophecies in public." Others are saying, "We do miracles." Too bad you don't. Our gift is better than yours. Our score is higher than yours.

Well, Paul in First Corinthians is getting in people's faces and is saying, "No, it isn't." In the church, there is no scorecard. The gifts differ, but there is one gift that is democratically given to all, a gift that is more important than all the others. And that is the gift of love. Love is the main deal. But love will knock off your high horse. Love will put you on equal ground with everyone else. Love will mess with you and your little attempts to justify your life at the expense of other people.

Whoa! I am now feeling a bit unsettled. I don't think I'm outside of controversy here. I thought that love, love, love was going to keep me popular, safe, secure. But love shakes things up. Love, according to Paul, is what makes us grow up. And growing up isn't so easy. It's hard on the heart and hard on the brain. We have to change.

“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.” Childish ways are ways that cause us to think we are the center of the universe, that our gifts are the most important gifts, that there is no call on our lives except what we want and what we demand. Maturation is an awareness that life is bigger than us, bigger than our opinions, bigger than our talents, skills, or our gifts. To mature is to grow in love. And love invites you into a much bigger world.

That bigger world is what gets Jesus in trouble today. It could be easy for us to miss what is happening in Luke today because we may not know the Old Testament stories mentioned by Jesus. In Luke’s narrative, Jesus is in his own hometown of Nazareth, and he’s gone to the synagogue, as was his custom. In other words, he is a fine pious Jew. He’s been given the important job of reading the scripture text, which is Isaiah’s vision of good news for the poor, release to the captives, liberation for the oppressed, and the forgiveness of debts for everyone. In commenting on the text, Jesus says, “This reading has been fulfilled in your hearing.” In other words, in him, the good news mentioned in Isaiah is taking place. His life and his mission are all about that good stuff.

Oh, the crowds are excited! They love what he read and what he is saying. And then they start talking about him. Isn’t that Joseph’s son, that is, one of us, one of the locals? And if it’s a hometown boy who is doing so much good, couldn’t we presume upon him for favors for the hometown?

Well, Jesus responds to their presumption by reminding them of two Old Testament stories: the story of the prophet Elijah who comes to the aid not to the hometown people, but to a *foreign* widow; and a story about the prophet Elisha who helps not a local leader, but a foreigner, Naaman the Syrian. And after he tells these stories, the

hometown crowd is enraged with him. They want to toss him off the cliff, so they can stone him.

Wow! From hero to hated one. Why? Because he wants the hometown folks to grow up. Because for him life isn't simply about the hometown. In Luke's view, Jesus is a prophet. And prophets aren't always received well in their hometown because prophets know a bigger story, a story about a love that includes and welcomes the foreigners.

Oh my! I said I wasn't going to touch this text with a ten-foot pole. But I must. Love isn't simply some tingly emotion that makes you feel good about you and your life. Love is what stretches you beyond the hometown and opens your heart to a bigger world. Love is what calls you to get beyond the enemy de jour, calls you to struggle with the natural human tendency to identify the people, the group of folks who are thought to be responsible for the current problems.

Today it's the immigrants, refugees, and undocumented people. Not too long ago it was the Muslims. Throughout history it has been the gays, the women, the witches, the Jews. Luther was an anti-Semite. Even the Bible, parts of the New Testament in particular, scapegoats the Jews.

For some reason, we human beings have a need for a scapegoat, have a need to blame somebody somewhere, have a need to create an us-versus-them mentality. It's childish. It is not where love takes us. It harms not only other people, but us. What some people are calling the "otherization" of the other serves to make us less whole, serves to cause us to believe a lie—the lie that we are not united, that the basic truth of life is not oneness but division. No matter how much we enjoy that lie, it still is a lie.

Jesus messes with our lies. Jesus unsettles our lack of truth telling. Jesus is a prophet, like Jeremiah, who plucks up and pulls down,

destroys and overthrows, and yes, does the positive: builds and plants. Love doesn't want us to remain the same. Love isn't satisfied with our us-versus-them mentality. Love wants us to trust an expanding universe, not a shrinking one. Love wants us to grow up, to mature. Love is the only thing that lasts, as Paul says. All our score keeping schemes die. But the love that knows us and embraces us and everybody else never dies. Give into love. And remember . . . love is controversial, and it isn't easy.