

January 31, 2010

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Luke 4:21-30

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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One of the more overused words in our language is the word love. We use it in our every day language, "I love you, man", we hear it on the radio "It's a love story baby, just say yes" or for the older set here, "She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah". Of course, there are the many t.v. shows and movies that explore the topic of love and literature has been written through all the ages about love, "How do I love thee, let me count the ways." So, often times we hear the word love, and it does not really sink in, we do not allow the idea to grab hold of us. When we hear the word, we might, mentally, make a couple of brief associations with the word and move on.

This often happens when we hear the passage we heard today from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. When we begin to hear this passage, a large portion of people start thinking about weddings; because, so many have been to weddings when this piece of scripture was read to the congregation. Therefore, before "The word of the Lord" comes out of the lector's mouth, many have gone off on some mental rabbit trails about some particular wedding, either thinking of one that was dreadful, because of all of their family dynamics, or perhaps of some beautifully romantic wedding.

However, Paul is not writing for weddings or about love in the romantic sense, or about love in the same ways in which we often use the word, attaching it to some fleeting emotions. Paul is writing about spiritual love to a church in crisis. Members are arguing over which members have which spiritual gifts, which gifts are most important, who is more important, how gifts should be used, and so on. It seems as if the members of that particular community are being guided by self-interests and probably trying to determine who gets control. Therefore, Paul writes and reminds them of God's love for humanity, found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul reminds them of the primacy of this love and that without it their gifts from God are all for naught. Paul reminds them that their gifts are given to them by God as a way to build each other up, to express and pass on God's love for humankind. This is an extraordinary letter.

However, 2000 years later we all still have disputes in the Church. We still argue over who has what gifts for what purpose; we argue over who has authority and who has primacy; there is often factional fighting and jealousy in the Church. Although we think our passions are driven by love, it is often anxiety that drives our passion rather than love. Or, at the very least this anxiety corrupts our love and we wind up with a misguided kind of love, one that harms community and relationships, because it demands specific results, specific order and specific

conformity to what we want. We obstruct the creative loving force of God, because we are trying to order the world around our anxieties and in doing so we create problems, for those we actually do love and ourselves.

Therefore, it is important to hear what Paul is saying. Love is not resentful or irritable nor demanding of its own way. Rather, as the famous lines go, love is patient; love is kind, love is hopeful. Paul is not naming feelings or fleeting emotions. Paul is naming love found in the choices we make. We choose love as a way of life; we choose patience, kindness and hope for others. Through love, we choose to remove burdens, rather than increase them. Through love, we choose to guide others, rather than control them, even if it means towards unpredictable outcomes. We choose ways to help others find creativity. We choose find ways to help those we love find their God given gifts, so they might blossom into a fuller expression of God's creation.....God's creation, not ours. This kind of life is within our reach, because the Spirit is with us, sustains us and makes it possible. We know this love exists, because we witness it in Christ. Though anxiety spills in to all areas of our lives, so can love, touching our all our relationships with our neighbors, friends, spouses, siblings, parent and child, and it is never too late to choose love and pass it on. Paul describes love as a model for Christian living. Thus, it is a model for all of our relationships.

There is an Episcopal priest I know, James Jr, who told me about his father, James Sr. James Sr. was a successful insurance man and the mayor of the town. He was also very involved in junior's life. From his early childhood, Jr. was challenged to excel. James Sr. would chop wood with Jr., when Jr. was very young, and then prop Jr. up on a stump and start quizzing him on spelling and word definitions, among other things. Sr. was involved in many aspects of Jr.'s life, trying to ensure the best possible life for his son. He saw great potential in Jr. They had a wonderful relationship and Jr. affectionately called his father "faf".

Jr. did well as a child and went on to college in the Ivy Leagues. All that hard work cultivating Jr.'s gifts paid off. It seemed that the master plan was working out for Sr. , until Jr. came home after college and announced he wanted to be an Episcopal priest. "What?!" said Sr. "I didn't send you to the Ivy League so you could be a priest. You need to be a lawyer or a businessman. If you are a priest, you'll be poor. You'll spend your days shaking hands and kissing babies. You won't bring people to God. People will think of you as a paid witness." On and on it went, but to no avail. It seemed as if Sr.'s grand plans for his son would not be realized. Jr. went on to seminary up in Canada over his father's objections and his father was angry. The relationship between the two was impaired, making life uncomfortable for others in the family. Sr. would not accept his son's choice.

Then one day Sr. was diagnosed with ALS, known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Jr. out of love for family and his father transferred to a seminary closer to home. In between semesters, it was clear that James Sr. wasn't going to make it much longer. He body was wasting away, racked with this horrible disease. One night,

as his father could barely sit upright, Jr. looked at him and thought, "God please take him now, he is suffering. I can barely stand to see the sight of a once strong man so weak. He is almost unrecognizable to me." He then walked over and kissed his father on the forehead, saying, "goodnight faf." Sr. looked back and said, just audibly enough, "goodnight preacher." It was a moment of reconciliation, a moment when huge burden was lifted from Jr.'s shoulders. It was a moment driven by love. The relationship was repaired. Sr. chose the great gift of love. He was not hung up on his own anxieties anymore. At that moment, he freed his son from his own set of rules and expectations.

That night Sr. died. But, Jr. felt free to use his God given gifts with a full sense of purpose and joy. Jr. felt free to be the person he felt he believed he was created to be. That happened over 50 years ago. For 50 years James Jr. has worked at his vocation, touching the lives of many. All the while, he has lived life without a sense of remorse or burden, because in the end, Sr. chose love. Sr. passed along a love that has remained with his son and spread to others. What a gift.

We can trust in love eternal. It sprung forth from God since creation. It was known in human form, in Christ Jesus. Love will continue beyond all of us. Each of our lives will end someday. All the things we acquire, all the ways we try to immortalize ourselves, all the projects on which we spend so much time and energy will wither away. The one thing that will last is the love we give away. Our lives have the biggest impacts, when we live as witnesses to love eternal, the same love we experience in God in Christ. Brothers and sisters in Christ, without love we are nothing. We have a choice in life. Choose love.