

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 31, 2016

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Jeremiah 1:4-10
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As next Sunday is our Annual Meeting, my mind has been dwelling on our life as a Christian community here at St. Michael's. Today's readings give us much to mull over. First we begin with the call of Jeremiah to be a prophet. He is young and appropriately unsure of himself. He is not at all convinced that he is up to the frightening task of speaking God's word to an entire nation, especially when the message will be unwelcome. God's reassurance comes with the declaration that God made Jeremiah for this very thing. We all are made for something. It may be very specific. I know several people who knew they wanted to be physicians from a very young age and never wanted anything else. Sometimes it is more general. A person is made by God to nurture children or to inquire into the mysteries of nature or be useful to groups and communities.

The Church at Corinth was a divided church with a number of disagreements smoldering. The apostle Paul devotes most of his first letter to the Corinthians to helping the Corinthian Christians find their unity in Jesus Christ. He spends three entire chapters in his on the diversity of gifts in the community. He points out that there are many gifts present, and that the community has need of all of them. He introduces his metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ. Each of us is a member, and a healthy body has very different members all connected to each other with different functions. People are made different both from the womb and as the result of our experiences. This means that sometimes we rub each other the wrong way. Or we don't quite understand what makes another person tick. Such differences sometimes lead to disagreements. This was clearly the case in Corinth; it has been the case

here. To a lesser degree, we will always be challenged to live harmoniously with our differences.

The beautiful thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians is sandwiched in between two longer chapters about the diversity of and how they should function in the church. This is not just a beautiful poem about love, although it is that. It offers a profound understanding of love that has the power to overcome division and to make a congregation healthy, indeed to make the world healthy.

The first thing about this love, *agape*, the divine love of God, is that it is not an emotion or feeling. It is different from *eros*, romantic attraction. It is different from *philos*, the affection of friendship. It is a virtue. Love is a habit that we develop by practicing it. We do small loving things for people we may not like very much. We pray for them. We show an interest in their point of view. We ask them to help us understand them better. One day, we are surprised to discover, that we actually do like them. Yet this love is not just about who we like or don't like. This love is to desire the highest good for the other person. We choose that highest good for one another.

How does the Gospel reading fit into all this? Jesus, like Jeremiah, had been formed in the womb for a purpose. When he grows up, he begins his ministry. He has already been traveling around Galilee, preaching and performing miracles of healing. Now he comes back to the town where he had been raised. We heard last week how he took the scroll of Isaiah and declared that right now the ancient prophecy had been fulfilled. In fact the last line of last week's reading is the first line of this week's. At first the reaction was positive: "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." Then they start wondering: "Is not this Joseph's son?" We know him and his family. Where did he get the chops to talk like this? Then Jesus perceives the direction this is going and takes it full on. "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do

here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.”” You all want to me to entertain you with some showy demonstrations of power. You think that somehow you are entitled to special treatment because this is my home town. I have to tell you that the power of God’s love doesn’t work that way. The people who got healed in Capernaum were real people with real needs. And not everyone gets healed. God works in mysterious ways. Remember that in the case of Elijah he was sent outside of Israel entirely to bring God’s saving power to a widow in Zarephath, which is entirely outside of Israel. And Elisha didn’t heal any Israelites of leprosy but the general of a foreign army. In short don’t imagine you are privileged in any way. Now, given the fact of that their country was occupied by a repressive foreign power, this kind of talk seemed disloyal and maybe even treasonous. In the same way today some get vilified for asserting that God loves Muslims as much as Christians. The crowd is so incensed that they try to kill him. The great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor was once asked in an interview how she recognized times when Christ was speaking to her. She responded, “When someone speaks the truth so clearly to me that I want to kill him.” The people of Nazareth had just had the truth spoken to them that clearly. But when they try to throw Jesus over a cliff, Obi-wan Kenobi, Jesus just walks through them.

So, I think the main lessons for us here at St. Michael’s are three:

First, God made us all different from one another, and this is a good thing. Every time we get irritated at another member, we should remember that we are all members of one body and we need each other. Second, we have no privileges as God’s people other than the vocation to be a blessing for everyone else. We should not expect more healings here than anywhere else, any more blessings. Or any fewer. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. And most important, the thing that will help us dampen our irritations and set aside our desire for privilege is love. We are called

to live and proclaim the transforming love of God. We love when it is easy, and we love when it is hard. We love those we know well, and we love the stranger. We love those with whom we are comfortable, and we love those who makes uncomfortable. We love our friends and we love our enemies.

We have just raised almost a million and half dollars to repair and add to this beautiful building. We can be justly proud of our generosity and commitment. But what we put in this building is more important than the shell. Our next job is the same as it always is: We need to make this a place where God's love is practiced, received, given, and proclaimed. We need to fill this place with love. For when every prophecy is gone and all knowledge passed away, what will remain is love.