



## **“What Does Love Look Like, Anyway?”**

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### **Scripture (NRSV):**

#### **Luke 4:21-30**

<sup>21</sup> Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” <sup>22</sup> All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” <sup>23</sup> He said to them, “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.’” <sup>24</sup> And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. <sup>25</sup> But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; <sup>26</sup> yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. <sup>27</sup> There were also many lepers<sup>[a]</sup> in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” <sup>28</sup> When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. <sup>29</sup> They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. <sup>30</sup> But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

#### **I Corinthians 13:1-13**

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. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,<sup>[a]</sup> but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 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. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

### **Sermon:**

Last week, the Rev. Mike Denton preached to us and reminded us all that we can put ourselves into the words of Jesus, who is quoting the prophet Isaiah, when he declares: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon *us*, because he has anointed *us* to bring good news to the poor. He has sent *us* to proclaim release to the captives...”

Did Mike know what came next in the text? Of course he did. He preached such an encouraging sermon, but he didn't touch on what came next!

He knew that after these words and the positive response at home, that Jesus actually challenges his hometown crowd and gets them so angry, they want to kill him.

He tells them that the good news of God's release is not theirs to cling to. Not theirs but God's, and God shares it with all, including the ones they hate, despise, can't bear to be around. He smashes their thinking, and they don't like it one bit.

Many and many a church has been smashed to bits in the same way, time and again, by the radical demands of the gospel, by the outrageous teaching of Jesus.

When the United Church of Christ decided, in synod, to support marriage equality for all, (a vote that still left every congregation free to make their own decisions locally), still... every church in Puerto Rico affiliated with the United Church of Christ... every single one... withdrew immediately. And dozens of other churches in the UCC left in fury, left the conversation, left because it was too much for them.

Our own story here at Westminster includes plenty of fury and debate. People leaving, starting church elsewhere. Families divided, friends no longer being friends. You can ask any one of our elders about the “big split” in the early 60’s and watch the tears form in their eyes, because that split over the nature of how to be church was truly acrimonious and it really, really hurt.

Not so very long ago, after the people of Westminster agreed to call Marj Johnston as our assistant pastor, and ordain her... the first “out” lesbian to so be ordained in the city of Spokane, in eastern WA... there were plenty of church people and pastors that I had known for a while, who suddenly stopped talking to me, stopped inviting Westminster to do things with them, told us we had “gone too far” and dropped us.

So, yeah, I think we know some of what Luke is telling us about the work of Jesus. And I think last week, Mike knew what he was talking about when he reminded us that the words of Isaiah were for us, that the model of Jesus was the model of our action, here and now.

But you know what else?

It is scary.

It is hard.

It can hurt.

Where do we find the courage to continue?

I think the reading from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is exactly where to look...

It’s a shame that this “love passage” has been so overused at weddings that we can hardly hear it without thinking of fluffy dresses and rented tuxedos! Try!

Because, this is no sentimental goop.

This is muscular talk... if indeed Paul is right, and love is this way... it is not sentimental at all, it is *hard work*.

Because it *isn’t* faith, or knowledge, or singing loud, or shouting in tongues, or preaching mightily while looking good in a suit, or chanting in a cathedral full of acolytes and incense,

or shouting in front of Planned Parenthood, that matter to God...these, Paul says, they are *nothing*.

And I can think of hundreds, no thousands, no millions of Christians who would want to throw me, or you, or anybody who says this to their faces...off a cliff.

But here it is: It is love that God wants...it is love that Christ has. It is love that matters.

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Paul, I believe, is describing how God loves. Strong love. Brave love. Joyful love. Hopeful love. Sturdy love. Creative and learning love.

Love that looks on others generously. Love that will not give in to wrong, to mean, to cruel. Love that sees clearly.

Love that seeks the best interest of the others who are suffering, lost, afraid.

Love that wants peace within, and peace without, for all, not just for some.

Love that wants people to turn away from the un-loving, the un-beautiful, the un-life giving.

Love that is merciful, even when it is just.

Love that looks a lot like God.

Love that looks a lot like Jesus in action.

It's hard!

I sometimes hear myself saying, "this is impossible".

And then I remember, this is God's love...bigger than mine. Perfect, when mine is terribly weak and flawed.

But the breath of God is still in me, in us, and the good news of freedom is in us, and in me, blowing out of us, breathing out of me...

We can only follow, follow as doggedly as we can, follow together, encouraging, and pressing on...trying to show the world what love looks like anyway.