

EPIPHANY 4C/LECTIONARY 4

January 31, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Jeremiah 1:4—10 Psalm 71:1—6 ***I Corinthians 13:1—13*** Luke 4:21—30

Today's message is the last part of a three-part message focusing on our second reading from Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. Just to recap what we've talked about these past two weeks:

- ◆ Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians after he had already departed from them, when word had reached him in a letter that the Corinthian congregation was in the midst of conflict.

- ◆ There was division in the congregation over spiritual gifts. Specifically, in this section of the letter that we've been looking at, the conflict is about the gift of speaking in tongues.

- ◆ Paul has already pointed out to the Corinthians that all spiritual gifts are given by the same Holy Spirit to all. Paul has deconstructed the hierarchy of gifts the people had created, where speaking in tongues was considered the highest spiritual gift. By pointing out that all gifts are from the same Holy Spirit, Paul has placed all spiritual gifts on the same plane.

- ◆ All spiritual gifts are given for building up the community of Christ, the church.

◆ Paul used the metaphor of the human body to make his point that not only are all gifts of equal value, but each member – with their unique gifts – has a unique function in the body.

◆ At the same time, the members are interdependent parts. All members of the body are necessary for carrying out the body's work. All parts rely on the other parts, and when one doesn't participate, we all notice something is missing.

◆ In the final section of last week's reading Paul enumerated particular gifts that the Holy Spirit gives for leadership in the church. He lists apostles, prophets, teachers, “deeds of power,” gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, and finally, various kinds of tongues.

◆ Paul then concluded that section with a very cryptic statement. Since we read only the first part of verse 31 last week, I'd like to read the whole verse to you today, because it's a very important introduction to today's reading. Paul said, “But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.”

Remember what I said at the end of my message last week? I said that it is as if Paul is saying that there are spiritual gifts even greater than the ones he has discussed, that can somehow be achieved. What are these “greater gifts,” what is this “more excellent way,” and just how does one achieve them?

This, then, brings us to today's text. A very familiar text to many of us, I'm sure. Anyone here ever heard today's reading from First Corinthians at a wedding? *<pause for responses>* Have you heard it at more than one wedding? *<pause for responses>* But have you ever heard it preached other than at a wedding?? *<pause for responses>* Then let's take a good look at what is probably one of the most mis-used texts in the entire Bible.

First, to answer those questions that I left hanging:

(1) What are those “greater gifts” Paul refers to? Here's a hint: Look at verse 13. *<pause for responses>* Faith, Hope and Love

(2) What is the “still more excellent way” he mentions? *<pause for responses>* Yes! Paul speaks of love all throughout this passage, but he very clearly says in verse 13, “The greatest of these is love.”

I find it very interesting that this text occurs during Epiphany. If you remember from a previous sermon, our epistle readings are not selected in the Revised Common Lectionary to thematically match with the Old Testament, Psalm and Gospel lessons. The epistle reading is what's called a semi-continuous reading, meaning that it will be, more or less, a continuous reading through one of the letters in the New Testament.

So it's a bit of serendipity – or perhaps the work of the Spirit? – that this reading falls during Epiphany. Epiphany starts with the visit of the Magi, the wise men from Gentile nations. Epiphany is the season when we celebrate the gift of Jesus for the Gentile world. And just how does the Gentile – or shall we now say “non-Christian” – world judge us as to how well we adhere to what we say we believe? Non-Christians see what we do, hear what we say, and they judge us on how well we LOVE one another. They want to see that our actions match with what we profess to believe.

Let me begin to unravel all of this by looking at what Paul means by “love.” The Greeks had five words for love. One is *eros*, from which our word for erotic love is taken. Then there is *philia*, from which we get our city name Philadelphia, and means brotherly love. There's also *storge*, which means affection and is the sort of love one has for family members. And there's *thelema*, which means desire or will, such as when we pray, “Thy will be done” in The Lord's Prayer. Finally, there's *agape*, the word Paul uses in this passage, which is self-giving, sacrificial love.

It is this agape love that is to be the ruling ethic for all of church life; agape gives substance to all of the spiritual gifts in the church. Without agape, Paul says, all these spiritual gifts amount to nothing. They have no real, lasting substance.

In this passage Paul defines the essential characteristics of love: Patience; kindness; not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude; it does not insist on its own way; it is not resentful or boastful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing; it rejoices in the truth; love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. These are precisely the opposite of the character traits that were bringing division into the Corinthian congregation: envy, pride, rudeness, irritability, resentfulness, and so on. Paul is saying that love is the best way to overcome the divisiveness that is plaguing their church. Before the Corinthian Christians speak or act, Paul would have them ask: “Am I doing this with love in my heart?” If not, it is probably time to reconsider. Love is not just a feeling. Love is a choice. Love is an orientation of one's life toward others in thought and deed.¹

So, this answers for us that third question left hanging from last week: Just how does one achieve “love”? Agape love is a choice. Agape chooses for the other when the right thing to do might be difficult for us. Agape love is both a gift from the Spirit, which helps us to orient our lives toward God and toward the good, and a choice. Agape love is what Jesus gave to us, in both word and deed. Agape love is what caused Jesus to choose the path to the cross – and our ultimate salvation and reconciliation with God – and to say, “Not my will, but *thine* be done” after asking that God would cause this cup to pass from him.²

Paul emphasizes in this passage that agape love is the only reality in the church that will endure into eternity. All of the other gifts, including prophecy, are for helping the church during the in-between times. They exist to build up the church and to support its ministry, but they will no longer be needed at the end of time. In the larger scheme of things, these gifts for ministry and life together are for our “childhood” as Christians. But when we become adults, in the age to come – when we will see “face to face” – those spiritual gifts will no longer be needed.³

And so, as we continue to strive for life together as Christians, and to serve our neighbors in the name of Christ, agape love is to be our guiding principle. One of my seminary professors suggested to us that the question we should be asking before we undertake any action in the church is, “How does this action serve God's mission in the world?” But next to that we should also be asking, “How does this action express agape love to our neighbor?” And by that I mean, how does doing a particular action or ministry help us to be *FOR* the other? Is what we are about to do self-giving, or is it just selfish? Does this ministry help to enfold others within the love of Christ, or are we doing it just because we get something out of it?

I would stake my call on the truth that if we undertake a ministry out of true agape love, for each other and for those whose lives we hope to touch, God *will* prosper our efforts. That's because we're not doing it for ourselves. We're doing for the greater good of the kingdom of God.

Amen.

<1,556 words>

¹ From John S. McClure, "Fourth Sunday After Epiphany" in *New Proclamation Year C, 2003—2004: Advent through Holy Week*, edited by Harold W. Rast (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 103.

² Luke 22:42

³ McClure, 103.