

Sermon "A Still More Excellent Way"

Scripture lessons: I Corinthians 12:31 - 13:13, Luke 4:21-35

Sunday, February 3, 2019

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading, I Corinthians 13, is among the more familiar and beloved writings of Paul. We have marveled at the beauty of these words but unfortunately this admiration for the language has sometimes obscured and even trivialized the powerful and practical message Paul brings to a conflicted congregation in Corinth. The conflicts and power struggles among these early believers were caused by a distorted spirituality which lacked the one thing Christ calls us to be about: love. We begin with I Corinthians 12:31. Hear now God's Holy Word.

*But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. **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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; love is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup> but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror, dimly,<sup>[b]</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Luke 4:21-30. Jesus has read a familiar Isaiah passage from the Torah in the synagogue of Nazareth. Initially he is received with admiration and respect by his hometown. However, as he unfolds the meaning of these words by recalling familiar stories from their faith tradition about the way God's love reaches beyond their racial and theological boundaries, they reject the message as well as the messenger. Hear now God's word.

*<sup>21</sup> Then Jesus 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 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 Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way. Amen.*

The sermon title: “A Still More Excellent Way”

The text: “*But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.*”

*1 Corinthians 12:31*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, may we have the courage to choose the more excellent way you have shown us in the life and ministry of your son, Jesus Christ. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our strength and redeemer. Amen.

When our son Paul was in middle school, he wore a t-shirt that said, “Jesus loves you, but I’m his favorite.” He got a lot of laughs from his friends in the predominantly Jewish community of Clayton, Missouri. Of course, it was in jest, yet, it hinted at the kind of exclusiveness that is present in most religions, including, and perhaps particularly within Christianity.

Both of today’s lectionary readings address this exclusivity within congregations. It seems the congregation in Jesus’ hometown Nazareth and the congregation in Corinth have something in common. By clinging so tightly to their way, they fail to grasp God’s “more excellent way.” By putting up barriers they limit the unifying and inclusive love of God. What we see in these first century congregations we see in people of faith throughout history. This morning, perhaps by taking a closer look at their stories we can gain insight into our own stories and the barriers that keep us from God’s “more excellent way.”

For the congregation in Nazareth, their sense of themselves as superior was revealed in their interpretation of scripture. Jesus reads from the Torah and then as a learned Rabbi begins interpreting the meaning of Isaiah’s words through stories that were familiar in their faith tradition. By choosing the stories of Elijah coming to the widow at Sidon and cleansing the Syrian leper Naaman, Jesus announces that God’s deliverance is not limited to Israel. God reaches out and heals the poor and oppressed regardless of nationality, gender, or race.

Jesus’ listeners do not interpret the scriptures in this way, rather they see God’s deliverance for themselves as faithful Jews. They are offended by the one whose gracious words previously amazed them. Jesus has threatened their security, their salvation, their sense of being special on a deep, unconscious level, and they respond with violence. Their hospitality turns into rage as they attempt to drive this homeboy off the hometown cliff.

*But Jesus passed through them and went on his way.* The words Luke chooses to conclude this passage are significant for two reasons. They allude to Elijah’s mysterious passing recorded in II Kings and they also point to the mystery of the resurrection. No act of hostility or cruelty has the power to thwart the love of God. Another observation is that Jesus responds to organized hostility in the spirit of civil disobedience, going on his way and continuing his ministry without provocation or retaliation.

For the congregation in Corinth, their exclusivity was related to spiritual gifts. The Corinthians were not the first, and certainly not the last who became over zealous in their love for Christ, and in their enthusiasm, overlooked the effect their actions might have on someone else or the community as a whole. But more than their zeal, I think the thing that troubled Paul was their subtle arrogance and genuine feeling of superiority about being “in the know.” If the congregation in Nazareth was in the know about the interpretation of scripture – who’s in and who’s out, then the congregation in Corinth was in the know about spiritual gifts – who has them, who does not, and which ones are more important.

After outlining the spiritual gifts that were at the heart of their dispute, Paul explains that the gifts were given for the benefit of all to build up the community. He then exhorts them to “*a still more excellent way.*” Paul believed in his heart that the sense of superiority and division at Corinth were caused by a loveless spirituality. Therefore, the solution is not a further honing of the gifts, but the essential, practical, and enduring way of love.

The “way of love” Christ exemplified in his life and death: *I am the way, the truth and the life.*

The “way of love” that matures and moves us beyond the sometimes exclusive play of children: *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.*

The “way of love” that transcends the experiences and institutions in this world: *For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

In as much as God’s love transcends this world, Paul reminds us that a faith without love is meaningless. Rigid religiosity that lives with the expectation of privilege finds the news of God’s universal love unattractive. Let us never forget that God’s favor and God’s care are not restricted to a special group. We are not called to relate to God because of the benefits we will derive; we are called to God because of the magnitude of God’s goodness and love.

Two weeks ago Westminster hosted a table at the Martin Luther King Community Breakfast. This year we stepped up to become a Platinum Sponsor, donating \$1,500 from the interest of the Minority Scholarship Endowment to fund the work of the local Chapter of Frontiers International as they tutor young African American men within the Springfield community. The keynote speaker, Tracey Meares, J.D., is an African American professor at Yale Law School and was valedictorian of her Springfield High School Class of 1984, ironically the same year Virginia’s Governor chose to appear in a photo which has perpetuated racism, subjugation, and hatred. During the time of segregation and Jim Crow laws in our country, Tracey’s mother, Carolyn Blackwell attended one of the 5,300 schools across 15 Southern States for African-American children funded in part by Julius Rosenwald, a Jewish Philanthropist from Springfield who became part-owner of Sears, Roebuck & Company. In the spirit of the “still more excellent way,” Mr. Rosenwald donated one billion of today’s dollars to causes for social justice.

My husband Peter had just completed an education forum on Mr. Rogers (the Reverend Fred Rogers) an ordained Presbyterian minister who welcomed millions of children into his neighborhood to share the love of God. We learned a large portion of the funding that initially made his program possible came from Sears, Roebuck & Company.

As we sat at the MLK breakfast, I found my heart warmed by the connections made possible because of those who choose the more excellent way in the living of their faith. As we celebrate African American History month this February, let us continue to learn from the unmerited privilege, arrogance, and prejudice of our past. Furthermore, let us be humbled by those who have chosen “a still more excellent way,” by those who understand God’s love is not restricted to one religion, nationality, race, or gender, and by those who affirm we are all God’s favorites. Amen.