

Sermon: What Were They Thinking?

Year C, Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

[Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30](#)

Offered February 3, 2019 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

Before I really get into today's Scriptures, I want to take a quick, two question poll. How many of you recognized the reading from 1 Corinthians 13? How many of you would know I mean that passage if I said, "The one that gets used a lot at weddings. You know, love is not this, and love is not that. And the greatest of these is love.?" Thanks.

Question #2: based on your understanding of love, were the people of Nazareth showing Jesus love when *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.* (Luke 4:29).

Which brings me to the title of my sermon, "What were they thinking?" Why on earth would you put these two Scripture readings together?

Let's start with 1 Corinthians 13. It has three parts. Part 1 says the exercise of the gifts and the practice of sacrifice in themselves do nothing for the doer. It is love that makes these actions meaningful, more than displays of selfish pride or deeds of daring.¹ Part 2 says love is practical. Love does some things and resists doing other things.² Part 3 says spiritual gifts belong to the present. They have their appropriate part to play, but their end will come. Love, on the other hand, is the supreme feature of the age to come and thus enduring.³ I don't think any of that is a news flash. The reading from 1 Corinthians 13 is about love. It's beautiful and lyrical and it says what it's about.

There's one technical translation thing, which is the word in Greek that is translated "love" is *ἀγάπη*, which means a divine love. There's another Greek word for the love of lovers, and another Greek word for the love of family members. It doesn't mean we aren't capable of divine love. We love our lovers and we love our children fully, but differently. We don't turn to our partners and say, "sorry, we have kids now, I guess you have to go back to being an acquaintance." We love in all sorts of ways simultaneously.

So 1 Corinthians 13 is about love, about divine love. Bottom line: it's absolutely permanent, it's absolutely complete and it's absolutely supreme.⁴ Faith without love is cold, and hope without love is grim.⁵ Love is the fire which kindles faith and it is the light which turns hope to certainty.⁶ It is not the thing that leads to chucking someone off a cliff.

Last week I explained that the church at Corinth was deeply divided. They were fighting over whose gifts were the best. That got Paul crazy, so in the chapter before this one, he lays it out

¹ Charles B. Cousar, "Fourth Sunday after Epiphany: 1 Corinthians 13" in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C*, ed. Charles B. Cousar et al. [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994], 128.

² Cousar, 128.

³ Cousar, 129.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*. [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975], 125-126.

⁵ Barclay, 126.

⁶ Barclay, 126.

really clearly: all gifts come from God, we need each other, there is no hierarchy of gifts, and diversity leads to tension, so we need to take care of each other. We take care of each other through love, which is where he brings in today's beautiful reading about love.

But that's only part of the context. One thing you may not realize about Corinth is that it was a port city. It was on a key trading route in the eastern Mediterranean. It's actually on a thin, eight-mile isthmus separating two ports. If you have to sail from one to the other, it's over 100 miles and the seas you pass through are pretty treacherous. So, if the ship was small enough, they put it on rollers with its cargo and dragged it the eight miles to the other port. If it was too big, they lugged to cargo overland and put it on another ship. So Corinth is a bustling commercial town full of sailors. From all accounts, it makes Las Vegas look like a staid little town where the sidewalks roll up when people go home for supper and Bible study. Corinth was known for catering to every kind of vice, especially sexual. And these are the people that Paul send a letter about "loooooove" to.⁷ What was he thinking?

Another thing to think about is how much trouble the church at Corinth gave Paul. No sooner had he left, then they began straying away from the straight and narrow. When you read both of the letters to the church of Corinth, and remember those two letters are most likely mashups of at least five, so Paul was constantly trying to correct these people, constantly trying to hold them to account.⁸ When you read both of the letters to the Corinthians, you see a trail of broken expectations and failed partnerships between Paul and those people.⁹ Most people in Paul's shoes would ask, "How can I be a minister when they will not be the church?"¹⁰ And yet instead of writing that, instead of washing his hands of this misfit, backbiting gang of hooligans, Paul send this gorgeous love letter.

That's what Paul sees that most of us miss. We are reaching out with divine love precisely *because* they cannot be the church. We are honoring God by showing divine love to the faithless and broken. We are sharing divine love for those who live in those corners of life where God's love is most needed and therefore most unwelcome.¹¹ We can take our dim, limited, I-only-understand-a-little-bit-of-this-divine-love-thing into the middle of all this frustration and grief when we remember what Paul knew: love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Corinthians 13:7).¹²

When that seems to be asking too much, and it is asking far too much for any one human who can be so easily hurt, Paul gives us this to take with us into those tough places. *I will know fully, even as I have been fully known* (1 Corinthians 13:12). We are not alone. We are trying to love

⁷ John Short, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians: Exposition," vol. 10 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1953), 166.

⁸ Jeffrey D. Jones, "Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Homiletical Perspective, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 303.

⁹ Arnold B. Lovell, "I Corinthians 13." *Interpretation* 48, no. 2 [1994], 179.

¹⁰ Lovell, 179.

¹¹ Lovell, 179.

¹² Lovell, 179.

these people in this tough place with a divine love because God was there ahead of us, loving these people in this tough place.¹³

So now, let's go back to that synagogue in Nazareth. Last week, we heard that Jesus assured them that the promises of the Prophet Isaiah were being fulfilled. Jesus says he has been sent 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.*" (Luke 4:18-19). That gets the people who have known him all his life all stirred up. They know him as Joseph's boy (Luke 4:22) and, frankly, he's getting a little big for his britches, in their opinion. They know what they want to hear. They want to hear that he will heal people here in their town, not those good for nothings over in the LA Coliseum. They want to hear that when the famine was in the land, God stepped in for a widow wearing a #12 jersey in red white and blue, not a blue and gold #16. They want to hear that when lepers are being healed, it's their team's lepers, not some foreigner's. But what Jesus says to them is that God's love is not going to be hemmed in by what *we* want. God's love is going to go to tough places. God's love is going to go to unlovable people. God's love is going to go to where it is most needed. And we are going to take it there.

By putting these two passages together, the lyrical description of the love that endures beyond every human ending, with an action shot of mob violence, we are getting to see love the way God sees it. When we are the least lovable, when we are the least worthy of being loved, when we are the furthest from recognizing the great gift of God's love, that's when it arrives. That's when it arrives and it is born in by other people. Don't limit love to wedding days. Bring it with you everywhere, to lurid pleasure palaces, and hometown synagogues and to the edges of cliffs. Because that's where it was already going. Whatever the people who put these two passages together were thinking, they give us an insight into what God might be thinking.

¹³ Cousar, 179.