

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 4 Epiphany 2/3/19 Pastor Bill Uetrict

As you all know well, many events and activities were canceled this past week because of the snow and the cold. All those cancelations gave me time to do one of my favorite things: organize and purge! Well, in this organizing and purging process I came across some things I had written during my younger years. The one piece was something I had written to my wife long before we were married. Oh my gosh! It is amazing that she eventually married me. She must have known the love about which the Apostle Paul speaks today.

The words I wrote were religious words, but they were so.....religious, so jammed packed full of certainty, so doggone.....religious. Why in the world did my wife save this piece? If she wouldn't have discovered my action—and she always does—I would have chucked it in no time.

I also, in my purging and organizing, came across some articles I wrote for the Capital University newspaper. Oh my gosh! How did I ever know so much? Who died and put me in charge?

“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!” I am not sure I have put an end to childish ways, or that I fully think like an adult, but this is for sure: when I was a child, I spoke like a child.

Paul ends his beautiful poetic chapter about love with words about our vulnerability. He says, “Now we know only in part.” Now we *get it* only partially. We don't fully grasp life now. We have a lot of growing up to do. Life, Paul is saying, is about growing up, maturing. What we know as a child is not what we want to know when we grow up. And part of what we know as an adult is that we don't know very much, that we know only in part.

“When the complete comes,” Paul maintains, “the partial will come to an end.” Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see

face to face, Paul says. Then we will know. And amazingly, Paul says, we will fully know as we have been fully known.

That is such a remarkable statement, in my opinion. Much of our life seems to be about our knowing, our trying to figure life out, but honestly, we don't know a lot. And even when we get to figure it out (when we see face to face), we will discover that what mattered most was not our knowing, but our being known by God. We think what matters is *us* and *our* opinions and *our* knowledge and *our* certainty. And Paul reminds us that what truly matters is being known by God, being loved by God.

Honestly, that is a realization that pushes us toward our vulnerability. When it is about our opinions and our knowledge, it is about *our* control. And when it is about our control our vulnerability disappears. We really don't need other people. We don't need their thoughts, their insights, their truth telling. But when it's about being known by God, loved by God, then it doesn't have to be about our certainty or our control. We can be vulnerable.

William Loader suggests that vulnerability is "the soil in which love can take root," especially for people who are having a hard time sticking together. And that is the kind of people Paul is addressing First Corinthians 13. He is speaking to folks who are battling with each other, especially in light of and because of the gifts they possess.

Since you understand people you are not going to be surprised to learn that the people of Corinth were arguing that the gifts they possess are superior to the ones that others possess. The folks who prophesied (preached) thought that their gift was better than those who did miracles. Those who spoke in wild and weird tongues (unknown praise languages) thought that their gift was better than everybody else's. Gifts perceived as means for control and self-justification, entrance points to certainty, became sources for division. Good gifts given surfaced crabby people who end up fighting with each other.

I don't know if you notice what I notice, but very often people who are not vulnerable, people who see their giftedness as a source of superiority, people who are so darn certain, are often crabby, even angry. I listen to a certain kind of Christian radio on occasion, probably just for kicks, and I discover that so many of the folks on these programs are so certain about their politics, so certain about issues like abortion, so certain about their views on morality, so certain that the gifts they have been given are the most important ones. But they are also so crabby, so angry. I myself don't feel welcome in their little worlds. I myself don't experience in them the kind of love that provides me a place and receives me, broken and unsure as I am, into their hearts and lives.

Paul says that life is fundamentally about love. I can speak in fancy unknown praise languages, I can preach well, I can have great knowledge and faith, so as to move mountains, but if I do not have love, I am nothing. I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. I am not making beautiful music. When love is not at the center, the music is often just noise. You can sound oh so religious and miss the point. The point is love.

And love, by the way, according to Paul, is more than a feeling. Remember he is addressing people who aren't getting along. Love is an action. It is, as some folks want to argue, a verb. Love shows patience. Love reveals kindness. Love doesn't keep score. Love is not narcissistic. Love is not irritable or resentful. Love wants good things for other people, even when those people are people you don't like. Love hangs in there with people. Love trusts. Love hopes. Love is active. As Brian Peterson says, "true love is not measured by how good it makes us feel." Love is not shaped simply by feeling. You don't always *feel* real good toward the people with whom you disagree.

Peterson goes on to say that "the measure of love is its capacity for tension *and* disagreement *without* division." The measure of love is not that you feel good about someone, but that you don't allow the tension to cause you to dismiss the other. The measure of love is that

you continue to work for the well-being of others even when you are not thinking like them, agreeing with them. Now I realize that this is very complicated. I am not at all arguing that you should put up with people who misuse you or abuse you. I struggle with the part of our reading that is translated “love bears all things, endures all things.” I think sometimes love refuses to put up with some things.

In fact, if you are going to discover the kind of love that the prophet Jeremiah in our first lesson had to discover, and the kind of love that Jesus, the prophet, lived out in Luke today, you will have to come to grips with a love that doesn't put up with everything. You'll have to receive a love that is going to unsettle you, a love that will be hard.

Jesus is in his home town, preaching to the good home town folks. They just *love* him. They are *feeling* really good about the hometown boy who has done good. But then, Jesus goes and destroys the love-fest. He taunts them claiming, “You are probably going to say, ‘Do here in your hometown the things we heard you did at Capernaum.’ But let's face it: prophets don't do so well at home.”

And then Jesus really irritates the relatives and hometown fans. He mentions stories out of their own tradition that highlight the work of prophets in *foreign* lands and among *foreign* people. Elijah went to a foreign poor widow. Elisha healed a foreign big-wig military leader. Jesus is irritating his own people with the bigger world that he knows and is a part of. For Jesus, it is a matter of us **AND** them. And the local folks are so ticked off by that that they want to hurl him off the cliff.

For Jesus, love is big; it is massive. It includes the folks who are your enemies, the folks you don't like. It includes **them**. And that is unsettling. That is love that is unwilling to put up with everything, love that is hard, love that entails telling the truth. Jesus is not a prophet who simply tells people what they want to hear.

If you think that as you confront Jesus you are going to experience one who simply allows you to continue to hate the people you've always hated, continue to dismiss the people you have disagreed with,

continue to gather only with the like-minded people you've always hung out with, continue to think like you've always thought, then you are in for a rude awakening. With Jesus, it is a whole new world, a bigger world, an unsettling world.

Well-known author and evangelical thinker Shane Claibourne, who will be here on April 11, says "Jesus wrecked my life. I'm still recovering from my conversion." To meet Jesus and the love that runs his life is to be taken to the realm of God, which is a realm that turns our lives upside down. All of a sudden, we find ourselves forgiving people we'd rather not forgive, receiving people we thought we would never receive, embracing people we thought we would never embrace, thinking in ways that we thought we would never think, acting in ways that we thought we would never act.

This Jesus is a dangerous guy. That's why the hometown folks want to throw off the cliff. That's why eventually some Jews and some Romans will put him to death. He'll be too dangerous. But you have to get this. As Paul reminds us, when all is said and done, the only thing that will remain is love; the one thing that will last forever is love. The oh-so-certain, religious hometown folks and the foreigners will put dangerous Jesus to death, but love will have the last word. Love will raise Jesus from the dead. Our lack of openness to the love that runs the universe won't stop love. It will go on.

If that is so, and if our vulnerability is the soil out of which love grows, then maybe you and I can let go of all of our certainty, all of our need to control, all of our knowing, and discover the love that has discovered us. When we do so, we will be a lot less certain, but I have a feeling, a lot less crabby and angry, a whole lot more loving.