

“Born for Love”

January 30, 2022

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:4-10; I Corinthians 13:1-13

Many of the prophets tell us about their call. Isaiah encounters God in the temple; Ezekiel has a vision in the desert of Babylon. Amos is called to be a prophet while he's tending goats. But Jeremiah discovers his calling as a boy. He's told he was literally born to be a prophet. And even though he's not too thrilled to have that title, he feels young and inadequate, it still must have been sort of comforting to know he had a role to play in God's action in the world.

But the message Jeremiah delivered was a hard one for his people to hear. He called on their leaders to change their ways or suffer defeat at the hands of the enemy. But they didn't listen. Hard as he tried Jeremiah wasn't able to make much headway with them. He was never able to bring them to a deeper awareness of their truest selves. He couldn't help them see themselves more clearly in the mirror he held up for them.

That may be the curse of every prophet. It's hard to be taken seriously when you're trying to overcome generations of behavior to instill a new understanding. I was raised, for instance, to revere Martin Luther King, Jr. Everything I ever learned about him was positive and inspiring. So, I'm always surprised to learn that before his assassination in 1968 he was not a popular figure in this country. In fact, a 1966 Gallup poll found that almost two-thirds of Americans had an unfavorable opinion of him. But popularity isn't the point for real prophets.

And the same can be said of the gospel. One of my favorite quotes from the Southern Baptist journalist and critic Will Campbell is, “If they come to it like pigs to slop, you can be sure it ain't the gospel.” Christians are called upon to tell hard truths. We're called to point out not just our own faults but the ways society fails. When Christians have done that effectively, they've often been rejected. We didn't read the gospel lesson for this Sunday but it continues the story of Jesus' visit to his hometown of Nazareth that we started last week. That story in Luke ends with the good religious folks in Nazareth dragging Jesus to a cliff edge to throw him off. Not exactly the homecoming he had hoped for.

What we did hear was Paul's wonderful and eloquent ode to love that he wrote to the people in the church at Corinth. In that letter Paul spends a lot of time criticizing the people for their behavior toward one another. Divisions have developed within the church that have led to hurt feelings and inflated egos. So, even though they possess many gifts among them whether it's teaching or exhortation or generosity, all of it amounts to nothing if they have no love among them.

That chapter in his letter is one we've all heard many times, I suspect, at weddings over the years. We have a tendency to over-sentimentalize it because of that. Our language is more limited than the Greek of Paul's day; we don't have a word for love that distinguishes very well between romantic and selfless love. In Greek there are four words usually translated as love in English. *Eros* in Greek is what we think of as romantic love, but that word doesn't appear

anywhere in the New Testament. The word Paul uses is *agape*, which implies sacrifice. In John's gospel the verse that reads, "for God so loved the world..." the word for love is *agape*. It's the kind of love God has for us, a love that is boundless and unconditional.

But here Paul says it's what we're to have for one another. We are to emulate in our relationships with each other the kind of love God demonstrates to us in Christ. I think every real prophet calls us to this kind of love. Jeremiah, for all his warnings of doom and destruction, called his people back to love. He called them back to the true covenant, the path of Torah, that values others and protects the weak and vulnerable. The other night I attended by Zoom the service at Shir Shalom. The Torah portion being read was from Exodus 22. There we find how strangers and foreigners are to be treated in the life of Israel. They're to be honored and welcomed. The people are reminded, "for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt." That kind of empathy, seeing themselves in the experiences of others, is the love Jeremiah is calling his people to embrace.

It's what Jesus embodies in his life and ministry. And it's what Paul wants the people of Corinth to discover. Not only do they each have something of value and importance to offer for the life of the church, to contribute to the body, but they have love to give when all else fails. And ultimately everything else will fail. The gifts of knowledge and prophecy will end; that mysterious gift of speaking in tongues will fall silent, but love never ends.

We are born for love. No matter what political leaders or pundits might tell you; no matter how desperately some will try to induce you to hate one group or another because of their skin color or their gender identity or their religion or their politics, you are born for love. We are called to live for others, especially those our society has decided are expendable, people whose voices have been silenced. I was given an article the other day by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, scholar in residence at the National Council of Jewish Women, where she quotes Rabbi Akiva, a great ancient rabbinic sage, who "once said the greatest principle of the whole entire Torah is 'V'ahavta l're'echa k'mocha: You should love your neighbor as yourself.'" Rabbi Ruttenberg goes on to observe, "Holiness is in what we do in this world, in this plane. We serve God most—we are at the highest point on the mountain—not when we feel good, but when we stretch beyond ourselves and offer ourselves to those who need, quite badly, what we have to offer."

Because we are born for love, we can't look at the world through the same lens anymore that once gave us comfort and helped us fit in with society. In her book *Fierce Love: A Bold Path to Ferocious Courage and Rule-breaking Kindness That Can Heal the World*, the Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis shares her experience as first year student at Princeton Seminary. She came with all sorts of assumptions about what she believed and what the Bible says about behavior and certain life conditions that were all challenged in her time there as she met people with different assumptions. She writes, "Their stories and their struggles converted me from 'What does the Bible say?' to new questions: What is the context in which the Bible says that? And does that make sense? And is that right? And does it square with Love?" By entering their experiences, loving her neighbors as herself, she discovered the love she was born for, she discovered her calling as a pastor and prophet.

When we realize we are born for love all the certainties that once surrounded us and provided us security will fall away. Knowledge and prophecy will end, and all that's left to bear all things, believe all things, hope and endure all things is love. And we'll finally begin to see clearly; finally we'll know who we really are, even as we have been fully known. As love comes alive in us, God's presence will be revealed through us. Even if the world rejects us, ignores or dismisses us, even if it vilifies us, love will carry on. Against every force that threatens to undo us faith, hope and love abide; and always the greatest of these is love.

Amen