

January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Fourth after Epiphany, Year C

Psalm 71: 1-6

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Luke 4: 21-30

### **1 Corinthians 13:1-13**

*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. 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. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 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. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

***In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.***

**On one of the many trips to Maine that Tim and I have taken, I wandered into an independent bookstore in Blue Hill Maine and found a beautiful children's picture book called "Names for Snow". Judi K. Beach, the poet that wrote the book, and the book's illustrator, Loretta Krupinski, were both residents of Maine and thus very familiar with the many nuances of snow!**

The author notes in the introduction her long “fascination with the art and culture of the Inuits (native Alaskans)” and mentions the legend that they have over 50 names for snow in their language.

“Names for Snow” opens with these words:

*“We call it Welcome in November.*

*We call it Sheet when it stretches across garden beds.....*

*Call it Kitten when it sleeps in the crook of a window.*

*Call snow Lace when it lines the limbs of the lilacs—*

*Or Eyelet when it embroiders spruce.*

*Call it Mother when it dusts—*

*Or Magician when the landscape disappears.*

*Call it Prayer in its stillness—*

*And Harmonica when it whistles through the trees.”*

The illustrations are beautiful paintings of snow in all its moods, echoing the many names Beach creates to help us express what we see when the flakes fly!

I was reminded of this beloved book when I read our passage today from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, in which Paul speaks of love. We hear this passage only every three years in the Lectionary readings, but it is familiar because it is included in so very many weddings, including Tim’s and mine.

Paul speaks about love, the one word we have in English to speak of a many

faceted human experience, an experience for which one word seems deeply inadequate to cover, just as snow is simply not enough to explain what one experiences November to April in Maine!

As you may know the Greeks help us out as they had six words for love, well defined by the writer, Terri McDowell Ott. She explains:

*“Eros: named after the Greek god of fertility, describes sexual desire.*

*Philia: describes love towards friends, like the deep bonds soldiers share or the college roommate with whom we still share our secrets.*

*Ludus: is playful, flirtatious and casual, the love felt on the dance floor of your best friends’ wedding.*

*Pragma: is longstanding, like long-married couples enjoying each other’s company without having to say a word.*

*Philautia: self-love, can be experienced as narcissism or as healthy self-care and self-compassion.*

*Agape: is God’s love for humankind in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Christians, agape inspires our lives and our call as disciples.”*

As I mentioned, we tend to only hear this passage from Corinthians at weddings, so we tend to think it is a good list of qualities for loving a spouse:

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.*

And practicing patience and not being rude will definitely help a marriage get off on the right foot, but Paul was not advising newlyweds. Paul was trying to save a church.

Paul had established a church in Corinth. After he had moved on from them, he received a letter from the Corinthians asking for help, as they were fighting.

Despite being established in the first years after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, despite being proximate to eye witnesses to the life of Jesus, the Corinthians were still hampered, like us by our human weaknesses, struggling, like we do, to live more for others than for ourselves, to live a life of compassion and service.

The church at Corinth had talented folks in it; prophets, teachers, healers, speakers in tongues.....And instead of offering their gifts, they had fallen into a debate over who mattered the most.

The people of the church in Corinth had been debating the pecking order of their gifts. Did prophecy outrank preaching or did faith usurp knowledge, or if you gave away of all your possessions would that outdo everyone else's efforts?

Their answer consistently was that they each were RIGHT, and everyone else

was **WRONG**; they were boastful about themselves, and scornful of others.

And not surprisingly, these useless discussions were tearing the church apart.

And so Paul writes to the Corinthians about love.

Not Eros

Not Philia

Not Ludus

Not Pragma

Not Philautia

No Paul wrote to the Corinthians of Agape love, God's love for humankind as understood in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Agape is the love that God offers us, and that we are then called to share with others. Agape love is unconditional love; God loves us not because we are helpful or smart or clever.

God loves us because we are God's, and nothing can separate us from God's love.

This is the love that Paul tells the Corinthians and us, is the foundation of the church; all the gifts and talents are great but if we do not have love our church is nothing, just a noisy gong.

But if we have love, we have all we need to be the church.

In small churches like ours, folks can often feel we don't have enough to keep going: enough money, enough people, enough abilities, enough help.

With that familiar feeling in mind, listen to Paul preach to Corinth and us again:

*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. 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. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.*

We have enough, if we have love. But for people and churches, Agape love takes work and practice.

The writer Elena Vassallo, explains about agape love:

*“It is like the spiritual discipline that we sit down to every morning or every evening, because we know it requires practice..... It is too easy to live my life inattentive to what I hold most important. Paul speaks of love the labor, the exercise, the discipline.”*

*(Christian Century, June 1998)*

“It is too easy to live my life inattentive to what I hold most important.”

It is too easy to live OUR life as Trinity and as SMWC inattentive to what WE hold most important.

**Agape love takes practice, and time and repeated attention, daily.**

**This is not a description of a marriage, it is a call to us, to practice daily, to learn, to try and fail, and try again, to love as God loves us.**

**Amen.**