

4 Epiphany – Year C – January 31, 2010
Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30
Susan E. Wilmot

For much of time I've been contemplating today's epistle from Paul to the church in Corinth, I've had a variety of love-ly songs roaming through my head like some kind of insane channel surfer. Everything from Julie Andrews singing from *The Sound of Music*, "Raindrops on roses" in the terrible shadow of World War II. The Beatles rocking to, "All you need in love" released in 1967, as the war in Vietnam continued, and The Summer of Love became legend. The amazing Diana Ross with, "Stop! In the name of love" the same year Martin Luther King, Jr. led several civil rights marches in Alabama. To a wild-haired Tina Turner in frighteningly high heels belting out, "What's love got to do with it?" knowing the hidden torment of being abused by her husband. No doubt, we all have our own favorite stories of real-life love in relationship. Many may be linked in the hidden depths of our hearts and minds with songs or movies, books or even dreams. It doesn't stop there either. Love is obviously big business as well. Almost a whole week passed between Christmas Day and the annual emergence of rows upon rows of pink, heart-infested greetings cards in honor of St. Valentine. Even on the internet, Goodsearch or Google will return more than a billion hits on the word 'love'.

The challenge of today's epistle is frequently lost in fuzzy romantic images, which crowd our minds almost instantly, even as we hear the opening lines, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels..." Words that flow like a river of warm syrup, or like butter melting slowly into a toasted crumpet. Like the Godly meaning of love itself, or like Jesus' cross-shaped love, these provocative words from Paul, may have become blurred or faded for us. The word love has been so overused, and even abused that it is hard to reclaim it as the action that it truly is, instead of the emotional response we have come to associate with it. In the book, {*Crazy Talk*} *A Not-So-Stuffey Dictionary of Theological Terms*, love is defined as, "Not a thing that is blind but the act of actually seeing the needs of others and of putting their needs higher than yourself or your need.... We are only able to love because God first loved us.... God's very nature is love, since God's actions of creation, redemption, and sanctification are continuous acts of love." It is right to love. What we will consider today is the question of how loving rightly is best manifest in our lives, according to God's will.

In this inspired letter to the Corinthians and to you and me, Paul is sharing Godly advice on the primacy of love in the context of the Corinthians' misuse of their spiritual gifts. Today, we would say Paul is using the tools of spiritual direction, pastoral care, counseling, and even coaching to highlight for all of us, where we are in the bigger scheme of things, where God wants to lead us, and the best way to get there. Like a starting line and a finish line, Paul gives us the reference points we need to make a healthy assessment of where we are on the track, or whether we are even on track at all. One major starting point is how we use our spiritual gifts. Another is how we understand love as our fundamental relationship with God, without which Paul says, "I am nothing." The major finishing point is the eternal nature of this love that is the hallmark of God's kingdom. Another finishing line reference point is the primacy of love. Love is the nature of God, and the first fruit of the Holy Spirit. As such, love trumps all spiritual gifts.

So where are the Corinthians, on this matter, as Paul writes his letter? Sadly, they are in a kind of spiritual power struggle with one another, fueled by foolish pride and its inevitable consort, self-righteous aggrandizement. In the opening lines of this passage, Paul places all gifts of the Spirit into their appropriate context: that is under the power of God's love. Disharmony and all manner of havoc arises when we insist on our own way, which is so often contrary to God's will. Paul reminds us all that our spiritual gifts are meant to be exercised in the context of God's love, to the benefit of the whole. Outside of God's life-giving creative love, all the power in the world amounts to naught

in God's sight. There is and will always be one thing that is more important than being right, powerful or honored in this life, and that is Godly love.

This unconditional, *agape* love is no romantic fantasy, or a feeling, but faith in action – an intentional way of being in the world that reflects the fullness of our humanity in Christ. As we have already heard, *agape* love seeks the good of the other at all times. Most remarkably, this love has been embodied for all to see and know through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord and savior. The better way for the Corinthians and for you and me is also outlined for us in the detailed description Paul provides of *agape* love. “Love is patient; love is kind.... [love] rejoices in the truth. [Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” To the Corinthians' shame, their self-seeking distortion of living love lacks in each of these areas. For this to become reality in your life and mine, we too must examine our impatience and our cruelty towards others. We are called to recognize that love is God's gift, a fruit of the Holy Spirit, always rejoicing in Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. Jesus' love bore all things on a cross. Jesus' cruciform love endures eternally, and is the basis of our faith and hope in Him. When we acknowledge the source of all life and love, and live according to God's will, love becomes the antidote to our jealousies and vanity, our illusions of superiority, and our inappropriate lack of humility. The way of love in Christ Jesus, is the way of growth and spiritual maturity.

Paul continues to point out all the things that we do that tarnish or dull the mirror of God's love that we are created to be. “[L]ove is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. [Love] does not insist on its own way; [love] is not irritable or resentful; [love] does not rejoice in wrongdoing.” How would it feel to re-read these sentences replacing the word love with our own names? Generically, it would sound like this – I'm not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. I don't insist on my own way. I'm not irritable or resentful, and so on. Could any of us say that without feeling an overwhelming urge to revert to childlike honesty: “liar, liar, pants on fire!” I think not! The truth is, every single member of Christ's Body, every one of us, has room to grow in God's way of love. Actively, pursuing Christ-like love allows us to experience the fullness of life, which is being fully known by God, and fully knowing God.

To belong to God's church as a member of Christ's Body is to be an agent of God's love in and to the world, not working for self, but selflessly on behalf of others. Only this love is vested with a permanence not accorded the spiritual gifts that are for our earthly use in building up the Body. In the ministries of this community and the ministries of all Christians we see love as action, and love as a state of being, making God's kingdom a reality now. This love is God's presence in our lives, and the basis of our humanity. Your capacity, and my capacity for the fullness of human life is the extent to which we can live in the love of God revealed in the cross of Jesus. Growing into maturity in our faith is important. If we are still with Julie Andrews, hiding our fears by remembering our favorite things, or using drugs to avoid reality, we are failing to live into the abundance of God's freedom in Christ. Love does not seek to escape from a life of service to others. We do not stop in the name of love. Our response to God's love is always faith in action. There is no violence or abuse in God's love. Love always seeks to put the needs of the other ahead of our own. However, love *does* have everything to do with who we are now, where we are going, and how we are going to move towards our goals together. God's love is reflected in the way we share our spiritual gifts, and the many ways that we *practice God's graciousness*. And that is not crazy talk.

Amen.