

4th Sunday of Epiphany
Sermon 2.3.19

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

1 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. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Luke 4:21-30

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" ²³ He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" ²⁴ And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

“...justice is what love looks like in public.”
~Cornel West

They spoke well of him when they assumed they'd benefit from what good they saw in him. They changed their minds quickly when they realized there'd be nothing in it for them—not really, not *especially*, no extra benefit for their knowing this wonder-worker, no extra favor for their knowing the family of this center of power—Joseph's son!

Or, worse, there might be even less than “no extra.” They might get shortchanged of blessing or honor or glory or whatever they thought his being *from* there might bring them, those who were also *from* there. They might end up getting less even than total strangers, less even than outsiders.

This is what Jesus was getting at when he said that thing about Elijah, and that thing about Elisha. Both were wonder-workers in long ago-Israel/Judah. But when hardship befell the region—famine, plague—both these wonder-working prophets went beyond their homeland and their home-people to bring blessing to Gentiles (as in that widow in Zarephath) and to alien rulers (as in Naaman the Syrian), all while *not* offering blessing to those at hand. The stories, both, are haunted by a zero-sum reality, that one person’s receiving of blessing or healing means a whole host of people *not* receiving blessing or healing. Really, the way Jesus tells it, this is practically the point—this violation, this divine disregard. That the prophets of God would forgo blessing the people of God in favor of blessing people *not* of God, or at least not of *this* God, or at least not yet: it’s a pretty harsh lesson.

And apparently this wasn’t the wisest time to drive it home. The people were already pretty piqued.

To take a step back from that moment, it’s thought this is one piece of evidence suggesting that the writer of this gospel was himself a Gentile, as is now commonly thought. This would make him the only non-Jewish writer of all the biblical books; this would make his two books, the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, the only ones to have been written by someone outside the people Israel/Judah. Thus the tendency in the gospel narrative to show Jesus as demonstrating concern for outsiders, for women, for children: Luke perhaps felt like one such as these himself.

But this suggestion could have been made with stories of expanded blessing, or universal healing—a bringing of such things beyond the narrow or the national. The suggestion that God’s favor reaches even those who’ve been thought outside that circle of blessing or beloved community: this would best have been made with stories of now inclusion.

Jesus, though, tells stories of “instead.”

I don’t like that.

No surprise, neither did they—those at the Sabbath service in Nazareth that day. No surprise, their though misguided notion that they’d receive favor because the long-awaited Messiah had turned out to be their boy. No surprise their though wrong-headed assumption that since the one who’d turned out to be the Christ was from their hometown, so they’d surely get a bigger basket of goodies than everyone else. They were wrong to assume that, or even to hope for that.

But it's no surprise that they would. Those who are left behind in obscurity while someone of their type takes off to greater power or influence or glory or fame: those left in obscurity will often secretly hold out hope that they *won't* be left behind, that they'll be brought along on this great trip. And they might even come to resent the eventual fact that they would indeed be left behind, maybe even forgotten.

Having gone to Exeter, I've become accustomed to watching a movie or TV show, or listening to a newscast or to music, and realizing, "Hey, I went to high school with that guy on the news, with that woman in the orchestra." And I'll admit it, it always comes with a tinge of envy: I wonder if they remember me? I wonder if I'll ever have the chance to remind them of me? My kids are even used to it: "You went to high school with a lot of people," they say whenever I'm faced with a familiar face on the big screen or a familiar name in a by-line.

This week it was a little different, because the Sacklers in the news—Mortimer, my almost prom date, on the hook for hundreds of thousands of opioid deaths, thanks to our own Attorney General, Maura Healy, bringing the suit—she with whom I would have gone to high school if I'd gone to my public school instead of heading off to Exeter the next town over. (Guess I chose wrong. Stay in school, kids; in *public* school.)

Come to think of it, my Bible study group tacitly rejected the notion, too, which Jesus seems to have been suggesting, that it's all zero-sum. One colleague, when I pushed the point, claimed that what's truly of God isn't zero-sum, is actually positive-sum. Blessing, grace, forgiveness, love: none of these gets spent down such that they ever run out. Rather, they expand like bread dough once the yeast has been added.

So said my colleague, and I agree—a fact that those in worship to whom Jesus preached that Sabbath day seem to have overlooked or dismissed. But that shouldn't belie the truth of it—that God's goodness and favor are positive-sum, enough to go around, enough to abound! "Love is something if you give it away," I remember singing in elementary school music class, "give it away, give it away. Love is something if you give it away. You end up having more." And that's true. I agree with my music teacher, who loved that cornball song. And I agree with my colleague that in the realm of God the things of God *do* abound, such that you having of any of it doesn't threaten my having of these same things too.

It's just that such aren't the stories Jesus is remembered to have told here to his home synagogue. No, sad to say, these two stories—one of Elijah, one of Elisha—aren't storied of “in addition to,” they're stories of “instead.”

It's unnerving. It'll almost put you on the defensive. If you feel like something you've become accustomed to having suddenly might not be yours to have, suddenly might be someone else's to have, you might be put in mind of a fight. If something you've been entitled to were to become, even slowly, something you could no longer take for granted, that might put you in an aggressive mindset.

It certainly did those in Nazareth that Sabbath day. They would take Jesus and throw him off the brow of a hill, which is a landform we didn't even know Nazareth had to boast of. But there it was, at the very moment the mob needed it. Off to the hill brow!

As it happens, I think Luke's gospel has another particular concern, one other than for outsiders (women, children, Gentiles). I think he's also concerned with the power of a mob, with its potential to resort to mindless violence. I think I see this concern in his common use of a common ancient metaphor for describing the effect mob violence can have, engulfing as it can be, like a flood of rushing water. Water, the presence of it, the absence of it, the overabundance of it: this is a constant refrain in much of the Bible. But of course, right? Most of the events described in Bible took place in places where the question of water would have been a driving one. But here, it's the menacing aspect of an overabundance of water that speaks to the constant menace that is the potential for violent outbreak.

Remember, it's in Luke's gospel that Jesus is remembered to have remembered the time of the flood, the destruction it's imagined to have caused, the salvation the ark represented. Invoking this mythic past, Jesus spoke of when two people might be sowing in a field, and one would be taken up and the other would be left. Of course, we likely hear this in the wake of the theologically terrible *Left Behind* books. These would have us understand that being left is the bad thing. But the way Jesus tells it suggests the opposite—that to be left is to be at peace, to be steadfast and steady on your own two feet while to be taken up is to find yourself in the dangerous position, overcome, out of control, swept away. Really, to be taken up is as to be lost to yourself amidst a mob, given over to saying things or yelling things or doing things that you wouldn't do if left to yourself, that you'll likely regret having done once that fever has past.

Think of that encounter on the Washington mall two weeks ago—a group from the Black Hebrew Israelites manning a table and handing out pamphlets (and hurling insults at passers by), a group of white Catholic high school kids in MAGA hats there for the pro-life march, and a Native American man playing his drum. Think of how engulfed we as a whole society became, engulfed in outrage over an incident that, prior to Twitter and other social media, none of us would have known about or thought to care about because *nothing happened*. Hurling insults, confrontational stances, smirks on faces, the persistent if gentle beating of drum—it portentous to be sure, and it's something of a miracle nothing *did* happen. I think it's not for nothing that the Bible is so deeply concerned with the possibility, the *likelihood*, of violence breaking out. Think of how many early commentators came to regret their knee-jerk reactions to What Happened, as if recognizing that little good can come of being so suddenly and utterly taken up—though a break out of un-careful speech is an improvement over a breakout of something more vicious.

It's also in Luke's gospel that, when Jesus calls the disciples to become not just fishers of fish but fishers of men (and women), he imagines them out in their boat, and bereft of any catch until Jesus instructs them to throw their nets on the other side. Then, in this story, which we'll hear next week, their catch is so great it threatens to sink the boat, to engulf it into a flood of water. I think Luke's suggesting here that there's always the threat of engulfing violence to beware of, that especially whenever you gather a group of people together (as these soon-to-be fishers of people would do) and fill them with passionate urgency (as the church is to be) there's the risk that this gathering could be filled not with the Holy Spirit but engulfed in a menacing spirit, in a flood of unthinking conformity, mobbish coercion, even violence.

Finally, it's in Luke's gospel that Jesus leaves off an ancient notion that tends to intensify engulfing violence. This we heard last week, the first part of this told event when Jesus went to his home synagogue for the Sabbath service. Remember? While there, he read of the scroll, Isaiah 61, a passage that could be heard now as Jesus' mission statement, though was originally likely the mission of the people Israel/Judah settling back in the Promised Land once the exile was over. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he read, "because he has anointed me 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," and here he stops, though the original continues, "and the day of vengeance for our God to comfort all who mourn, to provide

comfort for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.”

It’s an abrupt leaving off, and not just grammatically or punctuationally. It’s the interruption of a logical progression. The people have been wronged, treated terribly; and now is the year of the Lord’s favor *and the day of vengeance for their God* to comfort those who mourn, as vengeance can do (really like nothing else), and to provide a garland, which is a bit of glory, instead of ashes, which is but humiliation. Really, it feels good when a bully gets what’s coming to him. It feels soothing when a jerk get laid low. It’s so satisfying when the biggest, baddest empire finally falls, unless it’s your empire that’s fallen. Putin is still trying to get vengeance for that now thirty-year old humiliation. Meanwhile, a gif making the social media rounds is of a man in a MAGA hat yelling at the person apparently taking the video to his left. He hollers and shakes his fist off to his left, but this has him not looking where he’s going so he slams into the post that is right in front of him, and it looks as if it hurt. “Haha!” goes the gif. “This the best thing on the Internet!” And there’s your dopamine burst to satisfy for the next few moments.

Except, no. Jesus left off that part.

And I suspect it’s with this leaving off that the people gathered for worship and study were first ticked off, first piqued. That vengeance was no longer on the table, that seeking revenge would no longer be thought as medicine for soothing what ails or relief for those humiliations that are as aches and pains, this was all the more problematic when the cause for wanting revenge would now come so close into the room. That the favor to which the people felt entitled they should no longer consider themselves entitled, that the blessing and healing the people could take for granted they could longer take for granted, that this whole salvation story moving forward would, though in large part be about expanded blessing and a widening of the circle, would also mean sometimes you forego blessing because it’s someone else’s turn or because someone else’s need is more urgent than yours.

With a universal God, sometimes blessing would be triaged. Bummer. And here I thought I had God in my back pocket.

You know, I hadn’t thought of that cornball song, “Love is something if you give it away,” in years, decades. It came to me just as I was writing this, suddenly. Then, that night, as I lay sort of awake, I remembered the name of it: “The Magic Penny,” for “it’s just like a magic penny. Hold it

tight and you have any. Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so many, they'll roll all over the floor." It all came back in my semi-waking sleep.

So did this: that love isn't just like a *magic* penny in this way, it's also like a real penny. The fact about money is that it costs society a lot when people hold onto their wealth instead of spending it, or, in the case that you have more wealth than you could possibly spend, give it away. Really, those jars of pennies we all have on our dressers: these cost society a ton. It would be *so much better* for everyone if we spent the pocket change that instead we dump into jars at the end of each day. And the same is true for wealth on grander scale.

I don't know a lot about this, only what I listen to on podcasts. So I seek out podcasts that will help me here.

One I listened to a couple weeks ago suggested something to the effect that ours is turning into a wealth economy instead of a growth economy; that is, an economy focused on managing and protecting individual private wealth instead of on incentivizing new growth. (Note please that growth means not just bigger houses and bigger cars, bigger TVs and wider highways, but meaning moreover growth in human capital and capability—growth of ideas and of the human mind and creativity and innovation. Recall the phrase: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste," the rallying cry for the United Negro College Fund. That's what growth I, acting on the understanding of this as true.)

Another podcast I heard suggested this: that the degree to which this turn contributes to rising inequality is the degree to which this turn contributes to a decrease in public health. Societies in which there's relative equality among its members are societies in which there are lower rates of depression, anxiety, and general un-health. Societies in which there's relative inequality, or growing inequality, as we have here, are societies in which there are higher rates of depression, anxiety, and general un-health—and not just for the poor (though they get the brunt of it) but for everyone.

What's more, this necessary equality for human health and happiness, peace of mind and commonweal: it's to be both equality of opportunity and of outcome.

In sum, studies in economics and studies in public health come together to suggest we're incentivizing the wrong things if we want a healthy society. Really, we ought to be taxing people's wealth more than we tax their work.

Yes, in sum, these studies suggest that what wealth and privileges some among us have come to feel entitled to are things we'd all be better off if that entitlement were either to go away, or were to be spread across the entirety of society.

And this, I should warn you, lands us in a realm of blessing that, if often is "in addition to," is also sometimes "instead."

Please don't throw me off a cliff. Please instead search this truth for blessing. Please, let's take this as building blocks for a better society, a better way of being together in this world of limited resources though unlimited blessing.

We are all together on something of a precipice. This is our chance.

Thanks be to God.