

SCRIPTURE

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. 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

21 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.

MESSAGE

There are a few texts in the bible that make me a little nervous as a preacher. James wrote ‘Not many of you should become teachers for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.’ Jesus said ‘Woe to you if you cause one of my little ones to stumble. Better to have a millstone tied around your neck and be thrown into the sea than to mislead one of mine.’ There are a few other cautions about the responsibility that comes with daring to speak in God’s name, it’s certainly not something to take lightly.

But this morning's text is the worst. The crowd in the Nazareth synagogue didn't like Jesus' preaching, so they grabbed him by hair and dragged him out of town to throw him off a cliff. And not just any cliff – I've seen this cliff.

Living in Canada, most of us are somewhat familiar with the Rocky's, the Laurentians, or the Appalachian mountains, and we picture a cliff as being a sheer drop of a few hundred feet onto the rocks below. Time to scream, and then nothing. It would be a terrifying, but quick and painless end.

Not so the cliff outside of Nazareth. It's not a sheer drop – it's a very steep hill, punctuated by jagged rocks the size of cars. If you were thrown off this cliff you might make it about thirty feet before you hit the first boulder, and you certainly wouldn't make it all the way to the bottom.

Getting thrown off this cliff would not kill you – it would horribly maim you. Broken legs, arms, back, internal injuries – you'd be wedged against a rock, halfway down, broken and bleeding, probably for a couple of days, until eventually the elements and your injuries claim you, and finally the suffering ends.

This is what the good, church-going folk in Nazareth wanted to do to Jesus. I thank God that there are no brutal cliffs around here, though perhaps I ought to remember to look both ways on the road on Sunday afternoons.

So why did this happen? They weren't bad folks. This week's reading is a continuation of last week, where we read of Jesus' declaration in the synagogue:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
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.'

The reaction of the congregation to Jesus' reading and pronouncement was good. All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth, and they began to talk among themselves. 'Isn't that Joseph's son? I remember when he was just a wee one. He's one of us, isn't he? Where did he learn to talk like that?'

Sometimes we take the 'isn't that Joseph's son' comment to be derogatory, as though they thought that Jesus was no-one special and was putting on airs, but the way the text is written that doesn't seem to be the case. They seemed to be filled with wonder that one of their own was on a preaching tour of Galilee, traveling from synagogue to synagogue and speaking words of wisdom.

So what went wrong? How did these proud supporters of Jesus suddenly turn to brutality? These good church folk suddenly turned into a lynch mob, filled with hate and cravings for vengeance.

Curiously, it seems as though it was Jesus who turned the mood of the worship service. Up to this point the people were reacting in a positive manner to Jesus' presence.

And then Jesus said 'I know what you're thinking. You want me to do for you the things I did in Capernaum.'

The bible isn't clear about exactly what Jesus did in Capernaum. It does say that Jesus had been travelling about teaching in the synagogues. However, Jesus was in the middle of teaching in the synagogue of Nazareth, so there must have been something more.

We know Jesus for his healings, and for casting out demons. Perhaps this is what the people wanted. But if this were the case, then why would Jesus respond as he did – with rejection? As we follow Jesus' ministry we see that wherever he went he was hounded for healings; he couldn't walk down the street without people calling out, grabbing him in the street. He was even patient when people tore the roof off a house to stuff someone inside who needed healing.

There wouldn't seem to be anything wrong with Jesus' hometown folks expecting some of the same. Jesus did works in Capernaum and among the Gentiles, surely the descendants of Abraham are worthy of a few miracles as well. Shouldn't they expect Jesus to do for them what he had been doing for others? Doesn't charity begin at home?

But instead Jesus began telling them stories about other people being blessed by God. By other people, I mean people outside of God's chosen ones.

He told of a famine in Elijah's time. Good Jewish widows were starving and dying all over Israel. They weren't saved, but instead God sent Elijah to a foreign woman in Sidon, which is in Lebanon.

He told another story, this one a generation later, of Namaan, a foreign king who was an enemy of Israel. Namaan had leprosy. So did many others. But God chose to heal Namaan through the prophet Elisha – he had Namaan bathe seven times in the Jordan river and he was cleansed. But what of all faithful ones in Israel who also had leprosy. Many of them probably also bathed in the Jordan. Why was God's blessing poured out on the foreigners but not the Israelites?

We remember the story of the woman who begged Jesus for a miracle, who said 'Even the dogs get the scraps that fall from the children's table.' But in this case, it seems that the children were being bypassed. In the two tales Jesus told, the food went directly to the dogs while the children were left wanting.

It's no wonder that the people found this greatly offensive – it seems as though Jesus deliberately said to his childhood friends and neighbours 'Nothing for you. I'm saving all this for strangers.' I'm not surprised that the people reacted with extreme anger; Jesus very clearly and decisively rejected them, after they had treated him well and with respect.

So why would Jesus do such a thing? Is this just an unwarranted slap in the face? What would he be trying to accomplish by being so seemingly harsh?

The only thing that I can think of is that their desire for miracles was not really sincere. They weren't really interested in being healed, or forgiven, or restored, but rather they wanted to see some cool stuff and enjoy the show. They wanted to be entertained.

And Jesus was essentially saying to them 'I'm not your dancing monkey. I'm not doing these things for your amusement; I won't do parlour tricks for you. I'll save it for others.'

Paul wrote in one of his letters to the Corinthians 'The Greeks seek after wisdom, logic, the word, while the Jews demand signs.'

He was saying that the Greeks value logic and reason. What they want to hear are solid logical philosophies nicely wrapped up with no loose ends. That is the way to reach a Greek.

The Jews, on the other hand, want to see signs. We see this over and over again throughout the bible. 'What is to be the sign? What's the sign? How will I know? Where is my proof?' Many times the people ask Jesus for a sign to prove his authority and pedigree, to the point that Jesus finally said 'You all keep asking for signs, but I tell you, I'm not going to give you any more signs, only the sign of Jonah.' The people didn't really understand what to make of that, so it seems they let it go for a little while.

the house will be on fire.

So, I suspect that this is what was going on in Nazareth that day. The people wanted a sign; some kind of miracle – not because they actually needed the miracle, but because they needed satisfaction of some other kind.

So Jesus rejected them outright. He made clear to them that this isn't a game, and that God is not to be trifled with or taken lightly. The gospel message is for those who are dying, not those just wanting something to do.

It's not unlike drugs. Taken for healing purposes by those who need them, drugs can be of great benefit; relieving suffering and saving lives. When we start taking drugs just for fun, because it makes us feel good – well, that's when we start running into trouble.

But there is something more going on than just Jesus reprimanding the folks and saying that he is not there to perform for them. That's not enough to move otherwise good people from thoughtful approval to a murderous rage.

Something else offended them – deeply – and I think it's this. Jesus didn't only reject his hometown folk's desire for signs and miracles. He did it in such a way that while putting them down he raised others up in their place, and not even other Jews, maybe better Jews. He privileged foreigners over his own people.

In place of faithful Jews, Jesus instead described a lonely faraway widow – a nobody, a non-person – and a foreign king who had kidnapped one of the daughters of Israel. Neither one of these seem to be deserving people. Who were they to receive the favour of God while the Israelites did not?

This is the first introduction in the gospel of Luke to the radical love of God. The first hint that there might be something more afoot than God sending another prophet to make Israel strong and make their enemies cower beneath their feet.

The fact that God loves other people, foreign people, terrible people, is scandalous. It is an affront; it is offensive. It knocks us out of our place of complacency and privilege, because this message hasn't changed. It's as true for us as it was for the people of Nazareth.

God loves other people – not just us.

That is what the passage from the Corinthians letter is about. Love is patient, love is kind. We like to use this passage at weddings, and it certainly does apply, but Paul didn't have weddings in mind when he wrote these words.

He was writing to a church that was experiencing a good deal of infighting and competition. People were trying to achieve rank, saying 'my gifts are better than your gifts,' and, 'I'm more favoured than you are.'

Paul was trying to combat this by pointing out that love does not compete – we don't have to push others down in an effort to get to the top – and indeed, that is a surefire way to move out of God's favour.

No, love is patient, love is kind. Love is not self-seeking; it always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres. Everything else is going to pass away, but that love will remain.

In fact, anything that we do without love is worthless. I could give the most eloquent sermon ever, do miracles, raise the dead, sell everything and give it to the poor, but if I do it without love, Paul writes, I've done nothing.

I think what he is getting at is that if we do good things motivated by love of others, that increases the range of God's kingdom of love. We are putting the needs of others ahead of our own.

If we act without love, then really we are seeking our own benefit. Giving money to look good to others, speaking well to gain status – basically then we are falling into the very thing that Paul was trying to correct in Corinth, which was competition. Thinking that we are earning God's favour, which inevitably leads us to putting down others, thinking that people not like us are inferior, less worthy. Less human.

So, now to try and bring the various threads together. We should not view God's favour of other people as a threat, as the Nazarenes did. They were furious that God would bless other people while overlooking their own obvious worthiness.

Likewise, we should not feel left out when God decides to bless people that we too may think of as outsiders. People who have made bad choices, who live without a care for God while we are trying our best to be good.

In fact, it's quite the opposite. The fact that God loves even the reprobate who rejects him, the fact that God is continually reaching out in love gives me great hope and security. For if God can love the least and lowest among us, then I can be sure that he loves me as well. I need not fear for my position.

God's love is our greatest security. Knowing that we don't have to fight for our position gives us the freedom to actually be patient and kind, to bear all things, to not insist on our own way.

The fact that God even loves the Patriots, despite Inflationgate, gives us the confidence we need to stop competing and putting each other down. There is nothing to be gained – our place with God is already secure – and in the face of that our place with other people is inconsequential.

So, at the risk of being thrown off a cliff, here is today's message. One: our spirituality is not about entertainment. There is a difference between genuinely seeking an experience, miracle, or direction from God, and wanting God to perform for us to satisfy our egos and make us feel special or superior.

Secondly: God loves everyone. Even those that we might not approve of. That shouldn't cause us anxiety, but should fill us with joy and confidence.

Rather than parsimoniously counting blessings that other people receive, we should pray that God continues to pour out his blessings wherever he may – the widow in Sidon, the tax collector, the drug addict, the banker on Bay St, the struggling business owner, the single mom, the soccer coach – anybody. It's all a net gain; every blessing adds to the world, it doesn't take anything away.

To belong to God's church is to be an agent of God's love in the world, not seeking our own advantage, but working on behalf of others and rejoicing with others when God works in and through them.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.