

LOVE WE CAN COUNT ON

2/3/19 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Epiphany 4 (C): Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Do you have any strange hobbies that you imagine no one else does? One of my hobbies is observing patterns; I like noticing the patterns we use to arrange our lives...the ways we seem to make sense of the world. Sometimes it's a pattern that undergirds most of our decisions and actions, and other times it's a predictable pattern in a sequence of events.

An example of the first type of pattern in my own life is that when I decide to read a novel, I typically choose something with complexity. The story might be told through the voice of alternating characters, chapter by chapter; or the setting might move back and forth, from past to future, finally landing in the present. For some reason, I want my mind to really be engaged while I'm reading.

On the other hand, when I'm choosing a movie my primary goal is to feel good inside; I don't want to have to think, and I don't want to watch anyone being shot. I know some of you like a good, fast-paced action adventure, but as I've probably shared before, I'll take a sweet, romantic comedy any day of the week.

Of course, romantic comedies are very predictable...in fact, they typically include an example of the second type of pattern I mentioned—a specific sequence of events—guy meets girl; guy gets girl; guy loses girl; guy gets girl back. Actually, that's probably what I like—the predictability; I like knowing...or at least believing...that we can count on love.

Unfortunately, life isn't a romantic comedy, is it? Relationships are not always sweet and predictable. I'd be willing to bet there are some of you who have experienced, or witnessed, romantic love gone south so many times that your stomach churns when you hear the words of 1st Corinthians: "Love is patient; love is kind."

Which is why we have to remember that Paul's letter to the Corinthians was not—in any shape or form—written with soon-to-be-married couples in mind. As you may already know, these words had no romantic intent at all. Rather than a sweet love poem, Paul was reprimanding a faith community that was busy fighting about whose spiritual gifts were most prized.

As I explained a few weeks ago, it seems that they were sort of swaggering around, with their chests sticking out, boasting that they were holier than thou, because they possessed the gift of prophecy, or the ability to speak in tongues, while their neighbor did not. To which Paul responds, "Really? You think you're so holy? You think you are closer to God than your neighbors? Because God calls us to love each other in the way God loves us. Are you doing that?"

The Apostle Paul describes, the level of love God shows for us line by line: "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. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things...love endures all things."

I just spent the better part of this past week at a conference for Episcopal clergy. Our theme for our time together was "Unity in a time of Division." It's a peer-driven conference, so rather than inviting a speaker to address us on a particular issue, a few participants are invited

to deliver presentations on the topic. Some people are asked to prepare more of a theological reflection, while others are asked to provide practical applications.

But other than those two directives: 1) the topic, which usually includes a two-to-three sentence description, and 2) the lens of either theology or practical application, no other guidance is given. This, of course, means that each presenter's take on the topic can vary widely from another's.

One of the board members shared with us that when they determined this year's topic: "Unity in a time of Division," they had imagined that we'd get deep in the weeds talking about how we as Christians might strive for unity during such a politically divisive time.

What happened instead, was that presenter after presenter, having never discussed this with each other, talked about the benefit of diversity—the beauty of us all having our own unique gifts, and that, only in Christ do we find our unity. So it's not us creating unity, but noticing where it is that God is creating unity among us.

This happened yesterday as we elected our new bishop of the diocese of San Diego. Early on in the 18-month process, as we put together the diocesan profile, we heard from a wide-range of voices about what type of leader our new bishop ought to be. Then there was a diversity of gifts represented in the candidates who applied, and varying opinions on the committee about who should be nominated. Finally, there were many ideas about the three finalists we were asked to choose between.

But all along the way, unity was found in how the Holy Spirit was at work among us, helping us to see the candidates, their gifts, and their calling through God's eyes. I believe it is from that place that we elected Susan Brown Snook to serve as our fifth diocesan bishop.

That is the kind of unity—the kind of predictable pattern—that Paul is referring to in the Epistle. He explains that "love never ends"; God's love never ends. God's love—unlike romantic love—is predictable; we can count on God's love.

Paul argues that everything else the community thinks they can count on—the gifts of prophecy, the ability to speak in tongues—those will all go away. Even our intellect—the knowledge we are so proud of—that, too, will eventually come to an end, but love—true love, that is, God's love—is eternal.

We read Paul's letter this morning in conjunction with a passage from the Gospel of Luke. Here we find people who were obviously, NOT seeking unity or practicing patience in their love. At first, those who are closest to Jesus—the people who watched him grow-up—are so very proud of him. They're braggin' on him, saying, "hey...can you believe it? This kid is one of our own; you know, he's Joseph's son!"

But when Jesus begins to speak the truth—the truth they aren't ready to hear—another familiar pattern emerges. You parents know this one...tell someone you love the truth about something they don't want to hear, and what happens? They get angry! We are told that the townspeople of Nazareth, not only get angry, they run Jesus out of town, all set to hurl him off a cliff!

And why do people get so angry when we tell them a truth they're not ready to hear? Because taking in that truth, would require an action on their part, and that action would initiate a change in their lives. We all know how much we like change; we don't like change; we like things to be predictable!

In the letter to the Corinthians, Paul states that in order to be true Christians, the community must mature their faith. He goes so far as to refer to their current behavior as childish, but it's only because he holds them in his heart with parental love. Paul knows the peace that God's love has brought to him, and he wants the world to know about the depth of that abiding love.

Because there's another predictable pattern in our human history: God loves humanity; humanity rejects God; God loves humanity anyway. The Psalmist and prophet Jeremiah describe this kind of love as being known from our very beginnings...that is being known by God in the womb.

Which is what Paul was explaining to the Corinthian's—that God's love was true in the beginning and will be everlasting. Our response is to mirror the same level of love in the relationships around us. That kind of predictable love can be counted on. It is a love that unifies, going beyond divisions with patience and kindness.

So I challenge you to notice, this week, where God's predictable love is unifying humanity in our beautiful diversity. As Paul proclaimed: "And now faith, hope, and love abide...and the greatest of these is love."

-AMEN

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,

Jeremiah 1:4-10

The word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Psalm 71:1-6

- 1 In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge; *
let me never be ashamed.
- 2 In your righteousness, deliver me and set me free; *
incline your ear to me and save me.
- 3 Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe; *
you are my crag and my stronghold.
- 4 Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked, *
from the clutches of the evildoer and the oppressor.
- 5 For you are my hope, O Lord GOD, *
my confidence since I was young.
- 6 I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;
from my mother's womb you have been my strength; *
my praise shall be always of you.

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.

Luke 4:21-30

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and began to say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 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?" 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.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 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; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.