

*Fourth Sunday after Epiphany*

February 3, 2019

SECOND READING. (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.

The Word of the Lord.

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke. (Luke 4: 21-30)

Then [Jesus] began to say to [all in the synagogue in Nazareth,] "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 home town. 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.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now do you see why I say don't get any ideas about that reaction to a sermon? No throwing off the cliff today. But I'm not going to talk about that.

I'm going to talk about a new show on Netflix. It's called "Tidy Up." Anybody seen it? It's about people who are trying to deal with the chaos in their lives – or at least the clutter in their house. You know what that's like. Right? The rising mound of clutter in the house. You look around inside the house, or in your garage, or on your desk, and you say, "Hmm. There's a lot of stuff there. I should do something about that."

This whole show is about people organizing their stuff. I've only seen a couple episodes. But, in the show, we meet these people who are feeling out of control of their houses, because of the kids, or work, or time limits, or hobbies, or whatever. And so they invite in Marie.

Marie Kondo is a four-foot, eight-inch Japanese woman, who is completely unimposing, and does not speak English. She walks in the door, and she asks everyone to stop. Stop, and close their eyes, and give thanks to their house for all it has given them. Sheltering them and what happens there. And, yes, the people are a little weirded out by that. But it really is a good idea to kind of stop, and center, and remember what's important before the chaos begins.

She starts with their clothing. She asks them to get out every piece of clothing in the house and pile it in the middle of the room, in this giant clothing mountain. And then, once they have their clothing mountain built, without shame or judgment, she asks them to hold each item of clothing, and ask, "Does this spark joy in me?" "Does this make me happy?" "Does this make my heart jump a little, this piece of clothing?"

And if you pick it up and it quickens your heart, then it stays. And, if not, then you thank it for the joy it once gave, and you send it away. Clothes, books, papers, kitchen stuff, memorabilia, all go through the sorting. And after an intense six weeks of sorting, the family that was out of control now has a tidy, organized house. And their lives are the better for it. The End. On to the next episode.

And so you ask, "What does this have to do with Jesus?" And the answer is: "Not much." Tidy houses are really not what Jesus was about. But, still, I am fascinated with the idea of putting your stuff to the test, about holding a T-shirt, or an electrical cord, or a kitchen appliance, and saying, "Does this spark joy in me?"

And it got me wondering about a different kind of stuff; stuff that we have but we can't see. It's not the stuff that's piled in the garage, but the stuff that is piled in our lives. The metaphorical stuff. I'm talking about things like fears. The fears that paralyze us. Fears about, "What is my body doing now?" Or, "That person makes me nervous." Or, "What is going on in this world?" I'm talking about grief. Grief for losses, or broken relationships, or broken dreams. I'm talking about relationships, some good, some bad, some we want to tuck in the back of a drawer somewhere and never see again. I'm talking about big questions: How can I be the kind of person I want to be? How can I influence my children, or the world? How can I follow Jesus?

We've got all this stuff swirling around in us. And wouldn't it be nice to take even one of those things and deal with it? Hold it up and decide, "Am I going to keep you, or am I going to put you aside?" I don't think Marie Kondo can help us with this one. But I wonder if Saint Paul can.

Today we heard the Thirteenth Chapter, the whole Thirteenth Chapter of the first Book of Corinthians. The first letter written to the Corinthian church. Corinth was a major port city. It was large, and it was diverse. It was a great cosmopolitan place, and, therefore, a great place to start a Christian community. It is what Paul did.

Paul stayed there for a year and a half, gathering people together, preaching the Gospel, and starting a church. After he left, the Corinthian church leaders wrote a number of questions in a letter to Paul, asking him about some things that weren't going so well. The letter to the Corinthians is Paul's reply.

Now, we're not sure exactly what the questions were that the Corinthian leaders sent to Paul. But we get the general idea that First Church Corinth was having some "disagreements." People were taking sides. You know the story. Like, "I've got my people around me, and I'm not listening to anybody else." And, "You can't make me do anything." And, "Did you hear what they said?" And, "Those people are just evil, and they are pitiful lowlives."

I know it sounds like American politics. But it also sounds a lot like some churches I know of, or some families, or some workplaces. Dividing into tribes and camps. Needing power. Needing to win. Forgetting who they are. Forgetting what they are about. Losing what's important.

Saint Paul is clear throughout the whole Book of First Corinthians. One thing unifies us all. One thing. And that is the Gospel. Christians center their lives in the Gospel. Which is to say, God first loved us, so that we can love others. Let me repeat that. God first loved us, so that we can love others. This is what we base everything we do upon. Love grounds the ethical life and witness of the Church. Paul is clear about that.

In other words, in everything we do, we hold it up and we say, "Does this look like love?" And if it looks like love, we hang on to it. And if it doesn't look like love, we let it go.

This begs the question: "What does love look like?" Saint Paul describes love in the Thirteenth Chapter.

Now, let me say here, many people have heard this at a wedding. Have you ever heard this at a wedding? Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I have heard it at many weddings. I've preached on it at a few weddings. It is glorious for that. But that's not why this was written. Paul did not write First Corinthians 13 for couples on their wedding day. It is for all of us to hear what love looks like. It is for us to hear what it's like to center our lives in the Gospel.

Paul begins:

*“If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn’t love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, if I understood all of God’s secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had faith that could move mountains, but didn’t love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything away to the poor, and even sacrificed my body to be burned, but I didn’t love others, I would have gained nothing.”*

In other words, ask: “Does it look like love?” If not, toss it away.

Then he goes on to say what love looks like. First off, “love” is a verb. He always refers to it as a verb. It is something you do. Not something you feel, not something you talk about. Agape, the love Paul describes, is active love. You *do* love. You *show* love. Love looks like patience, kindness, truthfulness, abiding, trusting, hoping, and enduring. Love does not look like envy, boasting, arrogance, rudeness, anger, resentment, and injustice.

As Christians, we are called to actively love all that God loves. We are called to love ourselves in our body. We are called to love the people around us. We are called to love the world in all its diversity and complexity. And we know, we know from experience, that is never easy, and it’s never clear. “Should I give in on this, or should I stand up for it?” “Should I say yes, or should I say no?” “When do I let go, and when do I jump in?”

It’s not easy to make the loving choice. Paul acknowledges that. He says, “*We see through a mirror, dimly.*” We’re trying to figure it all out. But we learn by doing. We learn by holding up our lives each day and saying, “Did I love?” “Did that decision look like love?” “Did those words I said look like love?”

We will learn by prayer. By confessing those things that were not loving. By praying for strength and the will to try again. By asking the Spirit to guide us and inspire us. And we will learn by resting in the glorious love that God shows to us through Christ. A love that is complete. A love that never ends. Remember, God loved us first, so that we can love.

People who are tidying up their houses hold up a T-shirt and say, “Does this spark joy?”

As followers of Christ, we hold up our actions, and say, “Does this look like love?” And then slowly, bit by bit, piece by piece, our lives become a reflection of the love of God.

Amen.