

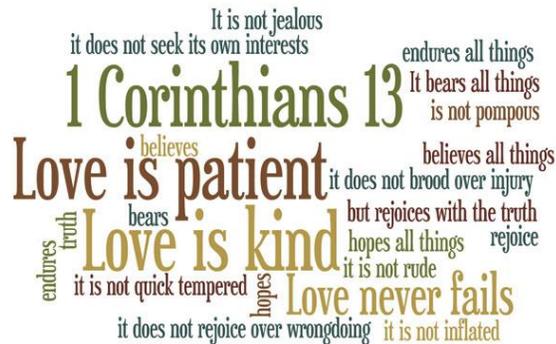
February 3, 2019
4th Sunday after Epiphany

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Explosives in the Sanctuary”

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Jeremiah 1:4 -10

4 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,

*5 '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.'

6 Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.'

7 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.*

8 Do not be afraid of them,

for I am with you to deliver you,

says the Lord.'

9 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.

10 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.'

Explosives in the Sanctuary

The church in Corinth had a long and full history. The gospel had been proclaimed. Lives had been changed. The surrounding community had seen and experienced the love of God. They weren't the only church in town; there were others. In fact, they had been sharing worship and service with another community; they even talked about merging the two congregations, but it never happened.

Over time, their membership dwindled, and the church in Corinth realized they would have to close. As with most churches, they never threw anything away. And so when folks gathered to sift through what was left in the building, they made an astonishing discovery. In a long overlooked cranny of the basement, there was a cache of landmines and other explosives probably hidden in the church at the time of the battle of Shiloh and forgotten. The Army was called in and the explosives removed. One mine was taken to the edge of town; people gathered curiously to see if they were still live. The explosion shook dishes for miles around.

For almost a century, the church in Corinth-Corinth, Mississippi that is, had worshiped, eaten bread, drunk wine, baptized babies, sung hymns and eaten fellowship dinners over enough rusting Confederate ordinance to blow away most of downtown Corinth. Would they, I wonder, have done anything differently had they known? If you were aware of the power, literally under your feet, would that give you any reason for a different way of being? It is something I wonder about for the other church in Corinth.

This is a congregation Paul knows well, and his letter to them is one we are familiar with especially this 13th chapter. It is a poetic hymn of love read often at weddings, equated with flowers and kisses and vows. The middle paragraph the "love is patient, love is kind" part can often be found inscribed in lovely calligraphy, suitably framed, hanging in homes and offices.

Such images, however, are far removed from Paul's original concerns. To be sure, they are beautiful words, but they were not written to idealize the quality of love or praise its virtues. Paul did not write about love in order to rhapsodize about marriage; he was writing about the need for mutual concern and consideration within the community of the church. A community fraught with distrust and conflict.

This is one of the first churches Paul started and that he now writes this letter to them must be painful. Since he was last with them, new problems and serious misunderstandings have arisen within the Corinthian community. A couple of things have happened that prompt Paul to write. One is that he's received a report from Chloe's people. Presumably, there is a house church in Corinth that meets at Chloe's house. There is discord, there is quarreling, their behavior is less than admirable. They're having trouble deciding how to resolve legal disputes; they're abusing the Lord's Supper. There's a theological debate over the resurrection of the dead.

Paul has also received a letter from Corinthians themselves. They want his advice about sex within marriage, eating meat offered to idols, the place of spiritual gifts within the community's worship, and Paul's collection for the church in Jerusalem. Taken together, these two letters provoke Paul to write back taking up all these issues and reframing them in light of his gospel proclamation. Paul sees the members of the Corinthian church standing at a moment of crisis and testing. Will they heed his words and recover a disciplined unity in the faith? Or will their community disintegrate before the forces of pride, rivalry, and spiritualized self-indulgence? It is to this fractured, disrupted, disagreeing, hurting congregation Paul writes about love.

Love should be the criteria for all they do, for all the ways they interact and treat one another. Love is everything. Even the most spiritual activities speaking in tongues, prophetic powers become, without love, meaningless. Even the most serving activities giving away all we own, become, without love, meaningless. These words call us to look at our own activities, our own practices, our own most cherished projects and ask, "Why am I doing this?" If we cannot honestly say, "I am doing this for and in love," then the legitimacy of our actions come under serious doubt. And this isn't just about our religious practices, but everything we do: business, academics, politics, family life. The basic foundation of everything we do is love.

All of us know of laudable causes, promoted by people who have lost this frame of reference and turn into loveless zealots. This is not far from what is happening in Corinth: precisely those Corinthians who were most singlemindedly focused on spirituality have become guilty of dividing the community and despising their brothers and sisters. Paul keeps them honest, reminding them that life lived in love is ultimately what really counts. And this love. It is not just a matter of feelings; feelings come and go; love abides.

Love is patient;
love is kind;
love 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 wrongdoings;
love rejoices in the truth;
love bears all things;
love believes all things;
love hopes all things;
love endures all things.

This picture Paul offers is one of habitual actions and dispositions. This way of living takes practice and commitment. These are behaviors cultivated over time and lived within the context of the community. From one another, we learn patience; we teach one another how not to keep a scorecard of wrongs done against us. As Paul's letter to the church in Corinth suggests, the church is the school for the cultivation of these habits and practices. Habits and practices which when embodied and realized have explosive power. A power that can guide a community's life in discerning the way of God that can support and encourage a pastor nominating committee that can listen to and hold a variety of expectations and hopes for what comes next.

As a congregation, you all are turning a new page in your continued story as a faith community. With Amy's departure and a period of transitional leadership ahead of you, you are given the opportunity to embrace and embody the explosive power of love that Paul puts forth to the Corinthian community.

In the time ahead of you, as you pray, discern and work together,

how will your life show the love that is patient, kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; not insisting on its own way; not irritable or resentful; not rejoicing in wrongdoings? In the time ahead of you, as you pray, discern and work together, how will your life show the love that rejoices in the truth, that

bears all things, that believes all things, that hopes all things, that endures all things?

While the church in Corinth, MS discovered literal explosives, Paul reminded that other Corinthian church of another explosive the power of love. It is a reminder we receive as well that together with our lives will ignite the fuse and the all-encompassing power of God's love will shake the rafters of the building and the depths of our souls.

With gratitude to Bob Dunham for helping me remember the Corinth, MS story.

Amen.