

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany • February 3, 2019

Jeremiah 1:4-10 • Psalm 71:1-6 • 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 • Luke 4:21-30

No text is read at more weddings than today's reading from 1 Corinthians. Ironically, 1 Corinthians also contains one reading that has never been done at any wedding in recorded history. That's 1 Corinthians 7:8, where St. Paul writes, "To the unmarried... I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am."

While the love that Paul is talking about in today's reading isn't romantic love, his words on love have something to tell us about all of our relationships. About the nature of our relationships with family members, friends, neighbors, sponsors, acquaintances, strangers, and, yes, even marriages and partnerships. But to understand why, it helps to have some background.

A couple of weeks ago, we talked about how the church in Corinth is full of divisions. It is fractured along class lines. There are some wealthy people in the congregation who have special programs just for themselves. It is riven by competition over spiritual gifts. Some people could speak in tongues and they thought that gift brought them closer to God. It is divided by "gnosis," or people who think they have some special spiritual knowledge or insight. And it is split by allegiances to various apostles who served the church. Instead of saying that they follow Jesus, many Corinthians said that they followed Paul or Cephas or Apollos.

When Paul writes about love in today's reading, he is thinking about how to deal with all these various factions. The way that the church in Corinth has constructed various hierarchies of wealth or skill or insight or faith. Last week, we heard Paul's famous image for what the church should be: a body with many members. So he is trying to show them that being a community means balancing unity with diversity. There is diversity because there are many members of the body, but there is a unity of purpose because there is one body.

The Corinthians' problem is that they have gone so far in the direction of emphasizing their differences that they've lost their sense of unity. The Corinthians are all about everyone having their unique gifts, but they don't see any common purpose for them. The Corinthians seem to think that because they're all different, they don't owe each other anything.

So look at how Paul deals with this in the first few verses of today's reading. Paul lays out all these amazing, seemingly praiseworthy, gifts. Speaking in tongues of mortals and of angels. Prophetic powers and understanding of mysteries and all knowledge. Faith that can move mountains. But if you don't have love, he says, they're worth nothing. Why is that? If your faith can move mountains, shouldn't you at least get partial credit?

There's a hint in the Greek word for love that Paul uses, which is agape. Agape love has nothing to do with romantic attachment. It has nothing to do with feeling a certain way about someone or something else. For Paul, agape is primarily about how God enters into relationship with us in Jesus Christ. And God loves creation not because creation makes God feel a certain way but because God has decided to love us. So agape love is not a reaction or a feeling. It's an undeserved, unmerited gift that creates a new relationship where there was none before. And God's agape love for us empowers us to love others in that same unconditional way. The love of God that is revealed in the crucified and risen body of Christ is the same love that binds together the body of Christ in the church.

If your faith in God can move mountains but you never move mountains for anyone but yourself, what value is that? And if you have all knowledge but you don't use that knowledge to lift up other people, what's the point? Paul wants the Corinthians to see that the diversity and differences in their congregation are held in unity by the agape love of God.

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Flash forward two thousand years and we seem to have the opposite problem. We are very comfortable talking about love as unity, but love as difference is more difficult for us. If the Corinthians emphasized the many members but never talked about the one body, we talk about the one body but not about its individual members.

In 2015, a version of this argument flared up in the national news because of an incident at Wheaton College in Illinois. If you're not familiar with it, Wheaton is a very conservative evangelical college. Their statement of faith confesses that Adam and Eve were the historical parents of the entire human race, that the scriptures are inerrant in their original writing, and that "the lost" will eternally punished. Just for comparison, at most Lutheran colleges, you're only expected to believe that This American Life isn't as good as it used to be.

So you can imagine what happened when a professor named Larycia Hawkins, herself an evangelical Christian, started wearing a hijab as a protest against Islamophobia.¹ In a social media post explaining her hijab, she wrote, "I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book and... we worship the same God." Hawkins was fired by the college shortly thereafter.

Much of the debate that followed was about the value of academic freedom or lack thereof on Wheaton's campus. Some of the debate was about the wisdom of appropriating Muslim garb as a sign of solidarity when no Muslims had asked you to. But most of the debate that emerged in the national press was over Hawkins' claim that Christians should love Muslims because Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

Whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God is an interesting question if you're into that kind of thing. But what most of the debate missed was that Hawkins had it exactly right for exactly the wrong reasons. The way that the church is called to interact with others, especially people of other faiths, has very little to do with what they believe. It has everything to do with what we believe. We never ask people what they believe or what we have in common before we decide whether we should treat them with respect. We believe that people were made in the image of God and that they have inherent dignity. We love them not because they have something in common with us but because they have something in common with God. That's what agape is all about. Saying that you should love someone because they are like you really isn't love at all.

But that's our instinct. We look for similarities. We try to frame other people's views and beliefs and experiences in terms that we can connect to. We think that we can only love other people once we see them as like us, and we think we have something in common. You can see that in our hesitancy to address public health epidemics until they affect people like us. You can see that in our insipid debates over assimilation. My personal favorite example is when people condemn sexist behavior with statements that begin with "as the father of daughters." If you were unable to understand that sexual assault was bad before you had daughters, you probably weren't ready to be a parent.

The agape love that Paul is talking about presupposes difference. It requires difference. Loving someone because they are like you or they connect with your experience really isn't loving someone at all. It's just loving yourself.

But the agape love of God allows us to see other people as they truly are. As Paul puts it, it allows us to see others face to face. Not just to see other people as reflections of ourselves or as projections of our own thoughts and desires for them. But to truly see them face to face as people

¹ Ruth Graham, "The Professor Wore a Hijab in Solidarity — Then Lost Her Job," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2016, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/magazine/the-professor-wore-a-hijab-in-solidarity-then-lost-her-job.html>.

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who are created with inherent worth from God. People who don't need to have their dignity charitably bestowed on them from us, but who need the love of God reflected and reinforced through our witness.

A few weeks ago, a group of us went to St. Matthew Trinity Lunchtime Ministry in Hoboken to help out and learn about what they do. After lunch was served we were talking with Spike, the program director, and he said something really revealing. He said, "I don't like it when people call us a soup kitchen. Because to me, a soup kitchen is a place you go and get a meal and then leave. And we're trying to create community." And it wasn't until I was back in my office that I realized something. That whenever Spike talked to a guest, he always addressed them by their name. Many of the people who were there that day were either statistics in the news or case numbers in a file. But because of people like Spike, they have a place they can go where their God-given dignity is reflected back to them around the table. A place where they can be known by name.

And this is why Paul claims that love is the greatest, even greater than faith and hope. Because the agape love of God is what makes faith and hope tangible realities in the lives of our neighbors. We affirm that the differences we all have are not barriers to be overcome but gifts to be embraced. And that our common purpose and unity flows out of our recognition of other people's particular identities. When the Holy Spirit moves in us to create public spaces and public communities that allow unity and difference to co-exist, we are not just being nice or being tolerant. We participating in the very love of God.

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