

4th Epiphany - Rev. Molly F. James

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

January 31, 2010

*May God's word be spoken, May God's Word be heard, and May that point us to the living Word who is Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

"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." So begins our reading from 1 Corinthians this morning. It is the beginning of Paul's beautiful hymn to love. It is a passage with which I am sure many are familiar. Many of you could probably recite this passage from memory! It is a passage that comforts us, perhaps because it so familiar. And it is also a passage that provides us with very important theological insights.

It is often our tendency to focus in on the word LOVE in this passage - and rightfully so, it is the heart of the message. But that single word is only the tip of the iceberg. Because with it we run into the limits of the English language. We only have one word for love. Other languages often have many. And we know that there is SO MUCH meaning behind that word. It refers not only to the enjoyment of things - books and movies or a good meal. To the physical attraction between two people. To the incredible bond that is formed between spouses. To the unconditional love of a parent for a child. To the ties that bind

two best friends together. Love is manifest in so many different ways!

Here in this passage, the Greek word Paul uses is "Agape." This word is sometimes translated as charity, but even that doesn't get at its full meaning. Agape is deep love - like the love one has for a spouse or a child. It is a self-giving love. A love so strong that you put the other person's happiness and well-being above your own. It is the love God has for each and everyone of us!

That is the love that Paul insists is vital to our lives. Without that love, we have nothing. We are empty. We need that love in our lives. It gives us meaning. It sustains us. It is the heart of our faith life. It is what connects us to God and God to us.

We need that love, that love that is manifest to us most clearly in the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is in Christ's coming into the world, in his ministry and teaching among us, and most profoundly in his willing to die on the Cross for us that we gain a glimpse into the depth and the breadth of God's love. It is a love so broad it encompasses all of creation, and it is a love so deep that God is willing to give of his very self, so that we might more fully understand how much he loves us. Christ is the preeminent embodiment of Agape love - a love that is willing to sacrifice for the beloved - for us, we are his beloved. And even that does not express the fullness of

God's love. Paul tells us that "now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face." The fullness of God's love is a mystery we cannot fully comprehend in this life. Imagine that! God's love is greater, deeper, broader than what we can even imagine. What a love it is!

There is something more that Paul tells us about God's love in this passage from Corinthians. Love "endures all things. Love never ends." Paul tells us that Prophecies cease, tongues cease, knowledge ceases. Earthly things end. Material entities do not last. This is a reality with which we are all too familiar. One cannot look at all the pictures of Haiti and not feel profoundly aware of how fragile things are. And yet, Love abides. Love endures. It outlasts all earthly things.

I don't know about you, but when I take that realization into my heart - when I really sit with it, I find my perspective shifts. The world looks a little different when you start with the conviction that Love endures. No matter what happens, no matter what pain and destruction happens in our lives and in the world, God's love abides. It is there. It is stronger than any force of darkness or destruction. It will endure. That is our solace and our comfort. God's love is a sure foundation that can never be shaken.

And that is part of why we come here - to this place, to this community. Because in the Scriptures we hear and study

together, in the prayers we say, in the hymns we sing, in the food we share - in our life together that that Truth is proclaimed and shared. It is made manifest in our life together. Not only because we hear and proclaim God's love for us, but because we live that same love out in our relationships with each other. We may not always agree. We may not always "like" each other, but this a community that firmly lives out the belief that every person who walks through the doors of St. John's is a beloved child of God, who is to be loved as we are loved.

This is our spiritual "filling station." We come here to be filled, because we know that without that love -without that beautiful love that is exemplified for us in our Savior Jesus Christ- as Paul tells us, we are nothing - we are not fully ourselves, not fully alive. We come here to be reminded not only that we are beloved of God, but also to be grounded again in the Truth that God's love endures. No matter how we may be shaken: God's love does not change, it does not fade. We come to be filled and reminded, so that we may then go forth and proclaim the Truth of God's LOVE with our lives.

AMEN.