Finding the Path to Love

Luke 4:21-30 & 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Sunday, February 2, 2025
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It's February, the month for chocolates and roses, Valentine's Day cards and love songs for sweethearts. So, let's indulge in a bit of homiletical improvisation this morning by playing a little game. It's called, "Finish the Lyrics." Since this is worship and not karaoke, I won't ask you to sing. But I'll say a few words from a famous love song and we will see if anyone knows the rest.

So here goes:

There's nothing you can do that can't be done
Nothing you can sing that can't be sung
Nothing you can say, but you can learn
How to play the game
It's easy…

Nothing you can make that can't be made
No one you can save that can't be saved
Nothing you can do, but you can learn
How to be you in time
It's easy

And the chorus is: "All you need is love, All you need is love, All you need is love, love, Love is all you need."

Ok, let's try another: "Like a river flows, Surely to the sea, Darling, so it goes Some things are meant to be…and the answer: "Take my hand, Take my whole life, too, For I can't help falling in love with you…"

So maybe we should have a karaoke Sunday!

Love is in the air, we say, and it is certainly in scripture. In the book we have been reading for the Brown Bag Bible Study, author Eugenia Campbell reminds us that

scripture itself "can be seen as the testimony of a great love, filled with passionate embraces, painful breakups and joyous reunions." Throughout scripture we hear the phrasing and lyrics of a love story more complex and varied than the words of a Taylor Swift song. Perhaps God, too, is a Swifty!

This morning, we read the greatest of all love songs. I have read and you have heard 1 Corinthians 13 at countless weddings—some of those marriages were made in heaven, relationships built on loving trust that sees beyond the mysteries and struggles of life. Others, of course, were not built on foundations of a love that is patient, kind, not envious or boastful. Yet Paul was offering more than a poem to star-crossed lovers. He never imagined his descriptions of love would be read at weddings. Instead, he wrote to a church so painfully divided that they could not stand to be in each other's presence. The Corinthian church was a gaping wound of division. It hemorrhaged joy, and was infected by selfishness and personal gain. The church was divided by class and social status, theology and practices of the faith. Their conflicts extended way beyond whether or not there should be more chocolate or sprinkled donuts on a Sunday morning.

And into this cavern of woundedness, Paul dares to point to a path of healing. He calls them to walk the path of love.

Paul does not mention Jesus by name in these verses, but this is indeed a love modelled by Jesus. As lovely as they are, these words offer a stinging rebuke to the church. The Corinthian church, founded in Jesus' name, had nonetheless washed its hands of the truth of the gospel, preferring to live not as the body of Christ, but as individuals concerned primarily about their own individual needs, wants, and desires.

No matter their successes, no matter how large their crowds or how full their worship, they were not walking the path of love nor where they are singing the love songs of Jesus. It is a love song which points to a new way of living, a way rooted in the grace of God that frees us and all people to live as children of God.

To understand that, let's go back to that tension-filled synagogue in Nazareth. As we said last week, Jesus has returned home. He's the local boy with a growing reputation, and his hometown folk welcome him like kin. They nod at each other,

recalling the goofy things he did as a teenager, or pointing out his resemblance to his father, Joseph. His grown-up frame fills the synagogue, and all are amazed as he reads from the Prophet Isaiah.

Remember the words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind." The people of Nazareth nod their heads in approval. These were familiar words. They trusted in the promise of the prophet that Messiah would come, a descendant to their ancestor, David, the Lord, the one who would deliver them. Their eyes are fixed on him as he sits down to teach.

They lived in anticipation that Messiah would come to them. As he says to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," their sense of anticipation heightens. Jesus emphasizes "today." It is a word that appears 12 times throughout Luke, always reminding us of the immediacy and imminence of the Gospel's arrival. This is a word that comes today, here, now.

But soon their excitement turns to rage when they realize that this kid – this hometown boy – the miracle-working rabbi – has come back home with a purpose greater than just meeting their needs. His mission is greater, far more reaching. Jesus offers hints of this by telling stories about Elisha and Elijah, the great prophets of Israel whose miracles extended beyond Israel. He tells them the story of Naaman, a gentile healed of his leprosy by God's grace.

Greg Boyle is a Catholic priest who has dedicated his life to reaching out to gang members in Los Angeles. Father Boyle writes that when God's boundless love penetrates our hearts it creates a new sense of kinship. It forges new bonds, healing divisions and old wounds. He tells stories of former gang members, sworn enemies, now working side by side, joking and laughing. Once, one of his "homies" as he calls them texted another. Both had been in prison, both had fired weapons at each other, but now both worked at the same bakery for the same purpose. One texted: "Hey, homie! I'm locked up at county. I was arrested for being the ugliest gang member in LA. I need you to come down and tell them they got the wrong guy!"

This is what it means to walk paths of love. To set aside our preoccupation with status, or social position, to seek the better of the other, no matter how different they may be. This pathway dares to keep no record of wrongs, and does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth, bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things.

A woman in South County sat in her apartment overlooking a busy street, watching the traffic on a busy street during one of these bitterly cold days. She saw a homeless man, a beggar, holding a sign. But he was on the sidewalk, far from where he could attract attention. His sign was written in a nearly incomprehensible scrawl, little letters that you could not see from afar. "This man has even failed at being homeless," she thought. She saw him in the cold, and eventually got up, put on her coat and walked down to where he was standing. "I'm going across the street to Schnucks to get you some hot soup," she told him, "But first you're going to tell me your name." She understood that love pushes us into community. It refuses to be invisible. It speaks hard words, and it remembers that within the grasp of God, no one is a failure.

We will have the chance to tell many stories about our dear friend Martha who died this morning. Perhaps the one I will remember the best was the time I heard her trademark laugh as she and our other dear friend Wilda Searight were leaving the Woman's Bible study. They were walking close to each other, smiling. "What are you laughing about?" I asked. Martha grinned. "The ladies were talking about how their teenagers were all giving them troubles. Chris, these are good kids. So, I looked the women in the eye and said, "You will get through this. If God could help Wilda and I survive our children's teenage years, Lord knows God will help you survive yours!"

Today we know she has continued to walk that path of love. Thanks be to God! Amen.