

Being Known, Being Loved
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, North Andover
January 31, 2010
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Texts:

Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

In preparation for today, I've been meditating on this morning's lessons for some time, and these are three very rich texts indeed. The OT lesson tells us how God made Jeremiah his prophet, in which he says to Jeremiah "Dude, I KNOW you, I've always known you, so trust me when I tell you, you'll be just fine. And besides, I'm always with you."

The epistle today explains clearly and completely what Love truly is, in those amazing words from 1st Corinthians that form a part of so many weddings and greeting cards and.... As a psychologist who studies how the mental processes of attention and memory work, I am confident that the familiarity of those words makes it hard to really hear them in their entirety. (Thank Paula for excellent reading)

And the Gospel lesson ... well, it doesn't seem to fit well with the others, because the first two are both about God's abiding love, essentially. In the Gospel, people in the synagogue kind of freaked out about what Jesus was saying to them, and tried to toss him off a cliff. Seems to be more about people behaving badly...

Now, generally speaking, a preacher will choose one of the texts, or even a phrase in one of the texts, and speak about that. I, in a perverse sort of way, like to go overboard and look at how all three texts might be saying something to us... kind of like the sermon trifecta if you will...

So today I'm going to talk about a couple of themes from these lessons: Love; being fully known; and a third one I'll reveal in a bit. As a context, I also want to point out that we are in the season of Epiphany in the church year; with a focus on the revealing of God's gift of Love incarnate to us, Jesus. I believe these lessons reveal something quite important about that gift.

The two themes, Love, and Being Known, fit together well. I'm reminded of the TV series Cheers from way back – it presented a place where everybody knew your name; the characters were people who felt known and understood. Now, these were not necessarily the most lovable people, they were all flawed characters in one way or another. As Diane likes to note, the difficulty of Christianity is that it's easy to love the lovable; but we are supposed to love the less lovable, too. Ultimately, the characters on Cheers loved each other anyway, and, amidst their flaws and problems, fans of that show loved them as well. I'll come back to that in a bit.

Before I came here to Massachusetts, I lived in Morgantown West Virginia, and taught at the University. I also attended Trinity Episcopal Church, baptized both of my children there, and found a church family

that was truly special. The rector of Trinity believed in the value of small fellowship groups, and there was a group of us who met on Friday nights for fellowship; to sing, to pray, and to discuss something we were all reading together. One of the leaders of the group, an Englishman, would lead us all in Evening Prayer or Compline, which, by the way, is a beautiful part of the daily office in the Book of Common Prayer... a peaceful meditation at the end of the day, and I recommend it to you. I was a part of that group for almost 5 years, and as a result of listening to an Englishman lead the prayers, in my mind I hear much of the BCP with an authentic English accent. His wife, an American from the Lutheran upper Midwest, would lead us all in hymns that she accompanied on a gorgeous grand piano in their living room. We were blessed to have a talented group of singers, including several professional singers. We all became close friends while our various and sundry children would play together. It was a place where everybody knew your name.

At one point, over several months, after singing and praying, the reading we discussed was a book on prayer. At the beginning of the book on prayer (which is buried somewhere in my attic, so I can't be more specific about it, like a title or author), I was stunned by something that I read, and the personal epiphany I had about it. God knows us. God is, as God was to Jeremiah, always with us. There are a myriad of Christian images – poems, hymns, sayings, prayers, and visual images that tell us about God's abiding presence, but something about the way the author of that book said it basically slapped me upside the head and made me pay attention. I think I really got it, for the first time.

Good Christians will sometimes do something that they know they shouldn't, and then maybe look upward in a way suggesting that God is somewhere away "up there," and hope that God isn't paying attention just now and I can get away with this. An ancient tradition in Christian worship is the confession of our sins – but God already knows what we did, because, God is always with us, always aware of us, always fully knowledgeable about everything we do. God is everywhere, and in everything. One of the Gnostic gospels, the Gospel of Thomas, has a line "split a piece of wood, and I am there." So confessional prayer isn't about cluing God into what we did; it's about acknowledging to God that which God already knows, because God was there when it happened.

The implications of that are profound. In the passage from 1st Corinthians we heard today, Paul writes that, at the end, we will see no longer as in a mirror dimly, but clearly, face to face; and we will know fully, even as I have been fully known. God already sees us clearly and completely, face to face, without makeup, unwashed, pimples, wrinkles, and all; we just don't see God all that clearly yet.

So God knew Jeremiah, and St. Paul, and God knows us. Fully and completely, before we were formed in the womb, before we were born... and now. All the slightly less than ideal ways we are, all our petty moments and our worst moments, and of course all our best moments too.

So what does that mean? Why does that matter?

In the midst of all that ... stuff about us, God loves us. So much so that God gave us Jesus, his only son, his begotten son, to be Love among us. And what did we do? We tried to throw him off a cliff in the

Gospel lesson today, and ultimately (it's worth noting), metaphorically speaking, we succeeded in throwing him off a cliff. [Notice how I managed to fit the Gospel in there!]

And God still loves us. God certainly knew that we were going to throw Jesus off that cliff. And yet, God gave us that gift of love – for God so loved the world, etc. Why?!

Because in the words we heard today, love is patient, and kind; it doesn't insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. Okay, then, if all that's true, then, I think, God is kind of sitting there saying to him/herself "Wait, they'll get it. It's okay. I'll wait." And wait, and wait... after all, Love bears all things, and endures all things. It never ends. What I'm saying is that God has every reason to be quite irritable with us. God gives us one chance after another, and waits, hoping and believing in us, because Love is like that.

Remember how I noted that the familiarity of those words might make us miss something? Here comes my third theme: God loves us anyway, despite our proclivity at behaving badly, because, as Paul writes: Love rejoices in the truth. Love rejoices in the truth. The unvarnished real truth. Not the truth as we want it (insisting on our own way), and not in how we want ourselves to be, but how we actually are, in truth. God sees us clearly, knows us, and rejoices in the truth of who we are.

Love happens in relationships between people. Yesterday being Diane and my shared birthday, I'm reminded that I love cake. But cake doesn't love me back, unless expanding my waistline is a sign of love...

Psychologists tell us that having healthy interactions with others includes truly accepting one's self, and interacting with others in a way that is honest about one's self. Most of us want to present a particular self to the world, one that is prettied up, with our flaws covered up. We worry about how others will perceive us, we worry about how they will react to our flaws and our mistakes. Our moments of not paying attention to things that matter to the other, and when those things make us appear less capable, or less attentive, or less caring.

How many of us have said, when something goes wrong "It wasn't my fault." We try to blame circumstances, or, worse, someone else for our mistake.

Psychologists tell us that a healthy, well-adjusted person says about a mistake: "Yes, I messed that up. I'm sorry. I realize that matters to you, and I'll try to be sure not to do it again." Even better, the person will identify a plan to improve, or to make sure that the mistake won't be repeated.

That's difficult to do. We worry that the other person will think us incompetent or as not caring enough about them. We worry about the implications for our jobs or our relationships if we confess the truth, and we try to cover it up so that the other person will think that we are "not that kind of person." But think about it: If someone says to you, "I'm sorry, I messed up" and so forth, and came up with a way to fix it or at least to do better next time, you'd forgive them, right? And move on. But if the interaction

leads to an argument about who did what and so forth, that's just going to end badly. Definitely not as well as the honest approach, rejoicing in the truth.

My favorite preacher was Fr. Walter Burghardt, a Jesuit priest at Georgetown. His sermons always had three parts: What is the scriptural lesson? What is it telling us? How are we to apply it to our lives?

Love is about knowing and being known, and rejoicing in the truth, no matter what, even to the point of patience when the beloved is really screwing up. We are truly known and loved by God, even when we truly mess it up. And what are we going to do about it in our lives? Be patient, and kind, don't insist on your own way... sure. Those are obvious. What is less obvious is to rejoice in the truth. Love is at its best – it rejoices – when it includes knowing, being known, and being true. I believe that living that way also sets us free from all the worrying about our relationships, at home, at work, and so forth. I believe these readings give us something to think about, to challenge us, but something that can set us free.

Amen.

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.