

Epiphany 4 – Year C

On this Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, we're pretty much in the middle of this Epiphany season. In other traditions, this space between Christmas with its feast of the Epiphany and Lent is just called "Ordinary" time. But calling it the time or season of Epiphany helps keep our focus on recognizing all the ways God is revealed to us, all the ways we can come to see God present, coming to birth in our own lives.

Our reading from Jeremiah tells us that God calls each of us – no matter if we think we're qualified or not. "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."

And we say, "No, not me. You must mean someone else. I'm too young, or too old. I'm not "religious" or holy. I'm ordinary." But God is not dissuaded. The Spirit of God is in each of us, and it is our task, our mission, to live out that spirit so that others can see the Love that is God.

It's this kind of Love that Paul is speaking about in that famous reading from 1 Corinthians. We hear this reading mostly at weddings – but it's not about romantic love. Romantic love is wrapped in feelings. The Love Paul is speaking about is *agape* – unconditional love, love that is a choice, love that comes from our decision to love. Romantic love – our feelings – may indeed draw us into a relationship with someone at the beginning, but romantic love is mostly about "me" – I love you because of how good you make *me* feel. Romantic love can even prompt me to do good things. I put money in the Salvation Army bucket at Christmas time because it makes me feel better about *myself*. But with *Agape* love, I love you just because you are. The focus moves from how you or whatever else make *me* feel to YOU – or the people I'm helping. In *Agape*, I am no longer the center of the universe. *Agape* love is a choice. I choose to love this way, this unconditional way that doesn't depend on whether I still *feel* like loving you or not.

C. S. Lewis wrote the book *A Grief Observed* after his beloved wife Joy died. It is essentially a collection of things he wrote in his journals as he tried to work out his grief. In one part, he is asking himself where his love for her “resided” – and he decided that his love for her was not based in his feelings, his heart – because there were times over the course of their marriage [and this applies to ALL relationships] when he didn’t *feel* very loving toward her, or she toward him! And his love for her was not based in his mind or intellect, because knowing someone and loving them are not the same. What he came to is that his love for Joy came from his will, from his choosing to love her, no matter what. Even after death, his choosing to love her was still there. That is Agape love.

What Lewis’s self-observations – and what Paul’s letter to the Corinthians – both tell us is that to love with God’s love is to choose to be other-centered. That’s the opposite of our inclination most of the time. Paul says, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.” And we all know that for the child, the whole world pretty much revolves around them. But Paul then says, “When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” We work at helping our children grow up, teaching children to think of others, to share, to consider the other’s needs. But this love for others is not so popular, especially in our culture today.

We are living in a time when we want to protect what we have so someone else doesn’t get it. We think that what we have is *ours*, for our own use and enjoyment – and not as something entrusted to our care to be used for the good of all. And that takes us to today’s Gospel.

Let’s remember that today’s passage follows immediately upon what we heard last Sunday, and even repeats a verse. Jesus has read from the prophet Isaiah – his choice. And he has pronounced that he – and we – are called to bring good news to the poor, to give sight to the blind, to liberate captives and to proclaim God’s favor, God’s love.” The Gospel says the folks there in his hometown were “amazed” by his words. “Stunned” might have been a better word choice. Like Jeremiah responds to God’s call, these people say, “This cannot be. He’s Joseph’s son, isn’t he? We know this kid.” How often do we try to stifle the call, the gift of others, because we “know” them? How often do we try to stifle our own call the same way? Remember Jeremiah...

But perhaps *because* they know him, they expect him to do for them what they have heard he has done for others. This is precisely the self-centeredness that so pervades our own culture. I see it on Facebook posts that say things like, “I’ll care about refugees when all the veterans in America are taken care of.” - And that’s when Jesus adds insult to injury by telling these folks, bluntly, that the good news of liberating the captive and giving sight to the blind is a gift to be directed outward, when he tells them his ministry is ‘other-centered’ and not for the benefit of their closed community alone. Caparnaum, you see, was full of Gentiles. The widow Elijah helped was a Gentile. The leper Elisha healed was a *Syrian* Gentile! What he was telling them was that the love of God, God’s kind of Love, Agape love – extends beyond our own limits. It is not enough to be Jewish, or Christian. No, to be in relationship with God is to grow up and practice love that is unconditional, is a choice, and is not dependent on my feelings or my affiliations.

About *this* love, Paul tells us, “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.” This is not what we see exemplified in the lives of our political leaders, here or elsewhere in the world, when we hear ultimatums and boasts. This kind of love is not what I hear in myself when I hear that voice in my head or out loud in the car complaining – with impatience – about how slowing the drive-through line is moving. This is not the kind of love we, as the church, have shown when in days past we offered the homeless a warm shelter, but only if they sat through a church service first.

Unconditional love is just that – a love without conditions. It is not about feelings. It is not dependent on the behavior or the political affiliation or the looks of the other. It is about a way of living that I choose, a way of thinking of and treating others that I choose to make my own. It is work. But what we are called to, from our birth, is to exemplify this love ourselves, by our lives, by our own choosing, whether we feel like it or not. God give us the grace to do so.

Amen.

- [Jeremiah 1:4-10](#) [1 Corinthians 13:1-13](#) [Luke 4:21-30](#) [Psalm 71:1-6](#)