

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

January 30, 2022

Psalm 71:1–12 (ESV):

Forsake Me Not When My Strength Is Spent

71 In you, O LORD, do I take refuge;

let me never be put to shame!

2 In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;

incline your ear to me, and save me!

3 Be to me a rock of refuge,

to which I may continually come;

you have given the command to save me,

for you are my rock and my fortress.

4 Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,

from the grasp of the unjust and cruel man.

5 For you, O Lord, are my hope,

my trust, O LORD, from my youth.

6 Upon you I have leaned from before my birth;

you are he who took me from my mother's womb.

My praise is continually of you.

7 I have been as a portent to many,

but you are my strong refuge.

8 My mouth is filled with your praise,

and with your glory all the day.

9 Do not cast me off in the time of old age;

forsake me not when my strength is spent.

10 For my enemies speak concerning me;

those who watch for my life consult together

11 and say, "God has forsaken him;

pursue and seize him,
for there is none to deliver him.”
12 O God, be not far from me;
O my God, make haste to help me!

1st Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 1:4–10, 17-19 (ESV):

The Call of Jeremiah

4 Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
5 “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.”

6 Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.”

7 But the LORD said to me,

“Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’;
for to all to whom I send you, you shall go,
and whatever I command you, you shall speak.

8 Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,
declares the LORD.”

9 Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me,

“Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
10 See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

17 But you, dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. 18 And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. 19 They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the LORD, to deliver you.”

EPISTLE: 1 Corinthians 12:29-31; 13:1–13 (ESV):

²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

The Way of Love

13 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Gospel: Luke 4:31–44 (ESV):

Jesus Heals a Man with an Unclean Demon

31 And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath, **32** and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority. **33** And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, **34** “Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” **35** But Jesus rebuked him, saying, **“Be silent and come out of him!”** And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. **36** And they were all amazed and said to one another, “What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!” **37** And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.

Jesus Heals Many

38 And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon’s house. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf. **39** And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them.

40 Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. **41** And demons also came out of many, crying, “You are the Son of God!” But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ.

Jesus Preaches in Synagogues

42 And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, **43** but he said to them, **“I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.”** **44** And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

Sermon 5 – Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

“God Loves Loving Lovers”

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13

Dear friends,

In our epistle lesson Paul attempts to frame and define love, which is awfully brave of him. Trying to pin down a definition of love seems like trying to explain color, or light, or heat, its one of those things that is hard to explain but you know it when you see it, you know it when you feel it. That would be enough for me, but its not enough for Paul, and its not enough for God, and so God through Paul gives us this explanation. Something so important should not go undefined, this is the kind of God we have. He doesn't leave us with generalities, He doesn't teach us in the abstract, He gives us something to work with. God is very specific with the important things of our faith, and love is important. Other than just defining love, Paul is also doing something else with this, taking human love and revealing what its true purpose is. What its true value and meaning is. Human love is an echo, a reflection, of the divine love that defines love. You have all heard God is love. Human love is a living example of what that looks like, but not a perfect one.

In the verses before this Paul has just given a very extensive list of all the different ways that people serve the church and serve each other. He talks about how different people are good at different things, and how this is a gift of God, and that those skills and those abilities are to be used to benefit others. That's pretty obvious to us, it makes sense to have a person good with numbers be a treasurer, it makes sense to have your pastor know how to use words. What is less obvious is what Paul is leading up to. He explains that everyone is good at different things, but the same God is responsible for all these gifts, and furthermore God is not judging you based on the gifts that He gives you. God does not regard preachers as more important than treasurers, God does not think that people who are great at quilting are better than those who sing in the choir. What interests God is not what gifts we have, but why we use them. The attitude that drives our gifts. He says, you all have all these different skills, but what you should have in common is love. That is what should motivate us to use our skills to help our neighbor. Not pride, not fear, not love of money, but love. It's great that you are good at what you do, good for you, what matters is *why* you do what you do. God has room in His plan to make use of any gift, any person, but God wants His people to be driven by love. That's

why He says the words He says. Attitude is important to God, as I've told you before, He's less interested in what you're doing than *why* you're doing it.

That is why Paul starts the way he does. **“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”** We think actions speak louder than words, you've heard that phrase. There's truth to that, but to God, love speaks louder than any action. A great deal of good has been done in the name of pride, greed, lust and envy. God wants His people's motives to be as pure as their actions. To sinners, that is quite the condemnation, in my experience my ego cannot shut up when it comes to the good works that I do. My pride gets bloated, my greed lights up, its just not a pretty picture. So to us, it seems like God is demanding the impossible. I can control my actions, but my motives and attitude are way beyond my control.

Jesus makes it clear that when He saves us, He transforms our hearts, our souls, our innermost essence. Passages like this one in Corinthians show us why that kind of wholesale remake is necessary. If God is judging me by what motivates me, by the attitude that I have, then I am doomed from the start. If God looks deep in me, and He does, and sees the greed, the envy, the anger, the hunger for revenge, and all the other junk that's inside there, then I have no hope. Jesus takes all our selfish, twisted motives and He unravels them, like a big ball of yarn, separating the good from the bad. He takes the good and makes it who we are, He makes it part of His good, His righteousness. He takes the bad and pins it to the cross to die. Jesus is what makes good actions good. As arrogant as it sounds to say, only a Christian can truly do good in this world. Everyone else is just faking it. And it is not because we are good, it is because Christ has made us good. We have the guts in our belly to admit that we are big giant hypocrites whose good works are motivated as much by pride and selfishness as they are genuine compassion. On the basis of our Confession, Christ makes our hearts new every day, and with new hearts, His love shines from us.

What is that love? Paul usefully defines this next. **“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”** This has to be Christ's love. All these words sound lovely. They truly are. This text is the basis for our weddings, we hang up these words on our mantles, because they are beautiful and true. But when we are honest with ourselves, if this is talking about us, then it is a lie. We are not these things. Not all the time. We try to be, we aspire to be, but we never get there. Not all the way. We're too busy, too tired, too confused, and too lonely. Christ is none of that. This is God's love, and Christ shows us God's love, He gives us God's love, and most key Christ gives us that love to make our love like His.

What do I mean by that? The love that we show each other, family and friends, fellow churchmembers, is meant to both teach us what love is, and to inspire us to seek that love. This is why God designed the family. God presents Himself as Father, and our earthly fathers are given to us to be an example of this kind of love. God tells us that we are brothers and sisters, you and I, and so we are to look at the brothers and sisters God gives us in our families as an example of what that means. Husband and wife are a mirror of Christ's love for the church. All human love is based on God's, and wants us to see our families, our churches, as teaching tools for just how God loves His people.

But sin gets in the way. Fathers do not show the love of God for their children. Brothers and sisters fight as often as they love. Husbands and wives snap at each other and try to undermine the other's role. Human love isn't perfect because we aren't, and so human love is also a reminder of what we're missing. We can have all the friends in the world, a big great functioning family, a fine spouse, and it will never quite scratch the itch. It will never be enough. Even a good wife turns on her husband. Even a good father lashes out at his kids. Even a good friend can betray you. As much as these things teach us what God's love is, they should also whet our appetite for actual, honest-to-God perfect love. Love that is all the things that Paul says. It is just that, no caveats. It is not those things ironically or sarcastically, we all want that kind of love in our lives. God tells us to treasure

what we have here, we do not have to somehow not enjoy the love that we share with other human beings. But we enjoy it knowing that a better love is to come, a better love is out there, and God tells us exactly where that better love is found.

“8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” All the human parts of love will fade. Sin and death see to that. But God's love, Christ's love, that never fades. My urging for you today, dear Christians, is to crave that love. What you see right now, in your families, in your friends, you see in a mirror dimly. What you see in Christ on the cross is bright and shining and true. Human love will never be enough. God's love is more than we could ever dream for. Take it, it's yours. God gives it to you. Through His words He gives it to you, through the gifts He gives you here on this earth, including the families and the friends He's given you, through pain and strife and loneliness He gives you His love. What that feels like will change from day to day, but love was never about feelings. God loves you because He tells you so, and in telling you so He gives you that love, no matter what you're feeling. Right now, all you see is a part of it. One day, you'll see it in full, one day, nothing will stand between you and the love of God. It will shine on you forever, like a new sun.

Amen.