

4th Epiphany – 31Jan16

Luke 4:21-30;

Jeremiah 1:4-10;

1 Corinthians 13;

Psalms 71:1-6

You may have heard of the Witness Protection Program, where somebody with information is secretly relocated in order not to be harmed by those they're reporting on. Well, this Gospel reading from Luke might be identified as part of the Pastor Protection Program, where a pastor is relocated so they won't be harmed.

This, after all, is shocking stuff. It's never wise to compare ourselves to Jesus, but indulge me for a moment: In last week's Gospel reading, Jesus stood up in the worshipping community, read from the Bible, and began to give his first sermon. Similarly, last week Pastor Sonja and I gathered in our worshipping communities, stood up to offer a Bible reading, and preached first sermons.

Now, in these following verses, Luke tells us that Jesus enrages the congregation so fiercely that they're about to hurl him off a cliff. Jesus manages to escape from the mob. But that might be where similarities break down; Jesus escaped, but your preachers might not be so miraculously favored. Thus, the Pastor Protection Program: the MCC pastors have been relocated for our security!

That's obviously (or at least hopefully) tongue-in-cheek. We're counting on goodwill persisting longer after our first sermons. But it does prompt the question as to just what Jesus could have said that would've driven his listeners so nuts. What from a sermon could be so outrageous as to make faithful people outraged? What in the world was Jesus talking about?

Well, love, of course. It's because Jesus presses us on love, which has to be provocative. It begins well enough, with God's love for you. We have beautiful words of that today. From before you were born, God has cherished you

and held you. God has been bound to your existence and eager for the best for you. Whether you were raised in the church and baptized as a baby and have been here ever since, or if you were away for a while, or even if this is brand new and never had been part of your life, still God has been with you from the womb onward. Yes, you are most certainly loved. Always have been, always will be.

Our appointed Psalm at the opening phrased this lifelong trajectory, from birth and the cradling, tender, motherly arms, through youth. The Psalm then goes on to face difficulty, to talk about protection and about rescue and salvation and about experiencing shame and those who disagree with you. God is a refuge because we need it. God is a fortress because, at least occasionally through life, we need it.

Even that strange metaphor of God as a rock is because sometimes we need a rock, shelter to hide behind, or a small island to cling to when we can't tread water anymore and the waves are sweeping over us. I counted 37 times in our Bibles where God is referred to as a "rock." In other places that rockiness is a mark of permanence, standing against the weather. It's also a reference of stability, a foundation, that when everything else erodes, you rest securely on bedrock. There are two other interesting passages for our direction today. Deuteronomy (32:18) mentions the "Rock who bore you, the God who gave you birth." It's hard to picture a less maternal or loving image than a hunk of stone, but evidently ancient people of faith saw it differently. More familiar for us, like our phrase of being a "chip off the old block," the prophet Isaiah (51:1) reminds you to "look to the rock from which you were hewn." In this case it reminds you of your likeness with God.

We'll come back to being like God in a moment, after focusing on looking to God. But with that looking to God, to cling to that "rock"

metaphor, any other reflections on how that is helpful as a strong, faithful image?

Okay, then looking to God, the main point of our Psalm. Remember, our faith doesn't *make* God care for us. It's not only when we believe that God will be mindful of us. But faith is about putting our trust in this God, understanding this refuge and place of security, about building on this foundational rock. Again, it's not that God's ignoring you in difficult times or that you had to pray harder. If you were away from church, if you doubted this belief or didn't know about it, still God abides with you. There's nothing you can do to make God love you more or love you less...but the benefit is to know that, to make use of it, to rely on it.

The Rob Bell video for last week's adult forum featured a parent carrying an infant through a horrible rainstorm. Even as the child was terrified, the parent kept whispering "I love you. I'll get you home." The child didn't know or anticipate that things would be okay. But it's a whole other thing in the midst of storms to grow beyond childish ways, to trust that the arms of that loving Parent are always around you, that God's love for you endures all things and never ends and is greatest of all.

That is the cherished language we have from this beloved 1st Corinthians passage. Yet that also begins to point us more directly into the outrage that encountered Jesus. See, it is the most amazing thing to be loved so unconditionally and completely, but it changes how you hear it when you have to share this love. So when you're told that God's love for you will never end, that's good news. When you're told that your love for a partner or family or whomever should be patient and not envious or irritable, that becomes another matter. It quickly turns from a relief to a challenge.

So 1st Corinthians 13, with all of its love language, is often considered the Bible reading for weddings. Maybe it was read at yours, or

you've been to weddings that used it or seen cards with it. But if it's setting a standard or goal for a relationship of trying to love rightly, Acacia could list numerous ways I've blown it just in the last 24 hours (though I'm hoping her love is patient and kind enough that she won't so quickly point out my faults).

Yet as hard as that is, it has still far greater proportions. With Jesus, this cannot remain with those closest to us. It's not restricted to spouses or partners or our children or family members, not just kindness for our kin. Jesus tells us to love our neighbors. The smart young lawyer before the parable of the Good Samaritan looked for a loophole, trying to ask what qualifies as a neighbor, maybe seeking the technicality of it only being a two-door radius. But Jesus' definition in the parable is for anybody we might meet, anybody in need.

Again, he won't let us off so lightly, because in the Sermon on the Mount he tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44). That's pretty darn tough, but it gets still worse because on the night in which he was betrayed, after stooping into the role of a servant, to wash the feet of his followers, Jesus gives that new commandment that we should love just as he loved us (John 13:34). This is when love is provocative, a word literally meaning to "call forth." It's the direct incident in Jeremiah—he was called forth to share God's love, even if reluctantly.

And that became exactly the problem in the Gospel reading today. See, I get to proclaim how much God loves you. But Jesus goes on to tell about outsiders, foreigners loved and favored by God, including a hungry widow and, coincidentally, a despised Syrian military leader. It's not only for us who consider ourselves well-deserving or qualified insiders. Now, I'm going to set aside the conundrum of God's miracles going to the apparently unworthy instead of in response to faithful prayers.

Instead, we're going to continue just a minute more with this difficult but fruitful question of loving like Jesus. Especially in the lead up to Valentine's Day, we're surrounded so much with love as a sweet, mushy, romantic idea. But Jesus conversely pushes us toward love that's offensive and provocative. This isn't sentimental, affectionate love—as Martin Luther King reminded us, not always about liking the other—but is God's Kind of love that rejoices in the truth and is patiently enduring and seeks healing and wholeness.

So where might love be provocative, where might God be calling us forth? Some examples: our society in these days has labeled Muslims categorically as enemies and as offensive, so we may figure ways to cross that divide. Closer to home, with Iowa caucuses tomorrow, this political process is causing lots of angst and anger. Perhaps offensive love would seek how to remedy that. What about relationships where we choose sides, especially when there's been a wrongdoer? How does enduring love help to make it right amid hurt? Or what are the lives we deem more valuable than others: by color or age or profession, "real" Americans versus immigrants, human over other creatures? Where have we placed these boundaries?

On a broad scale for us, I was reading this week about the UCC as a "church of firsts."^{*} It's an amazing list to celebrate—African American, female, gay leaders and pastors, abolition and civil rights stances, civil disobedience and schools to make a better society—these are remarkable aspects of a solid foundational identity and also marks of what could be seen as the offensive love of Jesus.

Yet I was also reading a piece this week by the always-provocative Chris Hedges on the "suicide" of the mainline church,^{**} saying we

have "looked the other way while the poor and workingmen and -women were ruthlessly disempowered and impoverished. The church was as silent about the buildup of mass incarceration as once about lynching. It refused to confront and denounce the destructive force of corporate power. It...busied itself with charity, multiculturalism and gender-identity politics [and paid lip service to diversity] at the expense of justice, especially racial and economic justice. It retreated into a narcissistic 'how-is-it-with-me' spirituality."

Those are heavy words. They might be arguable, but shouldn't be ignored. I don't want to say more, either to blunt them or to overwhelm you. So let's conclude with a moment of reflection, either silent or aloud on those who are most offensive and hardest to love for you. Where is the love of Jesus provoking you?

^{*} http://www.ucc.org/about-us_ucc-firsts

^{**} http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_suicide_of_the_liberal_church_20160124