

Sermon, Announcements, and Prayers of the People for February 3, 2019

Homily - 'Tough Love' Rev. Dr. Linda St.Clair

Most any Sunday of the year, the homilist could talk about LOVE as the theme, coming from the source of the lectionary readings for the day. And this Sunday is no exception.

However, in today's readings we find that love in this context, is not cloaked with sentimentality and comforting support, but rather with a clear concern to **promote** or **provoke** actions that could cause some risk for whomever the message is intended, or call them to change their ways when they don't feel they need to! This could be the people of the long ago past, or even us today.

For example: Jeremiah is being called to be a prophet and Israel had a bad reputation for how prophets were often treated. Often they told people what they did not want to hear. In the Corinthian church, members were rebuked for not living out the commandment to love and needed to change. In the gospel we find Jesus telling members of his home synagogue that they were excluding those they considered "other" which was not obeying God's command to love God and neighbour.

Years ago, the phrase "tough love" became popular and was used and misused as often happens. The definition that I find helpful for today's look at love, goes like this: *love or affectionate concern expressed in a seemingly stern or unsentimental manner especially to promote responsible behaviour.*

Love is used and defined we all know, in many different ways inside and outside the Bible. And the many kinds can come together in different formations ranging from the romantic (popular form) to deep bonds of love for family and friends. But we find that the most important form of "love" in our Christian theology is that of *agape* or a "God-like" love. We find this unconditional, pure and sacrificial form, **the expressed goal of our faith.**

It can include others forms we know, such as the love of a spouse/partner or child, or a close friend. But *agape* alone is known to be unconditional (no strings attached), pure (the giver is open with no hidden motives for themselves), and sacrificial (love even though it may cost one social status, economic gain or loss, or in some cases physical risk or loss), for those we do not know or even like! *Agape* will cost...make no mistake.

So let us take quick trip through today's readings and see if any of these stories while not meant for us personally, or as a church have any application or are they just for those of the past.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Jeremiah tells the story of how he became called to be a prophet, one who was a spokesperson for Yahweh. When God calls certain persons to be prophets as recorded in scripture, it is a given that there is risk involved. Prophets were not always popular

nor even liked, for the “truth” they reveal often offended people and therefore there was risk involved —from rejection and derision to even more physical dangers.

In this short dialogue between God and Jeremiah, God begins by declaring that the Lord consecrated him to be a prophet before he was born. —not much free choice there Jeremiah protests and says he is too young and does not know how to speak. —God replies that Jeremiah **will** go— but not to be afraid for God will be with him and will deliver him from danger. Further, God declares that he will put words, the right words, into his mouth.

A key message of agape love is here: *you can do what you are called to do because you will not be asked to do it alone, God will be with you...all the way.* Even so, this to our contemporary eyes seems to be rather stern. Yet, it could be argued that the author(s) of this text are “promoting responsible behaviour” a form of tough love as well. The evidence we have is that Jeremiah did say yes and felt God’s support and guidance. However, he did suffer at times for political and religious positions he was called to declare, or these were turbulent times in Israel. Jeremiah joins the ranks of those who will sacrifice out of the kind of love that agape calls upon.

In many religious and social movements today, within and outside the church, many people feel the call to make a difference in the lives of others, even at some cost to themselves. Maybe they do not see themselves as “prophets” like Moses, Jesus, Paul...but their actions seem to head them in that direction.

I Corinthians 13:1-13

In our epistle today, we have a section which we have all heard times at many weddings. But when we dig deeper, we find that the context for this letter is not celebratory!

Paul is criticizing the church members for NOT following agape (love) as they should. So, when this letter is read to the congregation in Corinth they know the Paul believes that they have NOT living up to the gospel message of love/agape that he taught and has lived out himself at great cost.

In fact, they are acting in ways that say they do not understand AND that they need to change their ways! The church in Corinth is experiencing a painful divisive crisis. People are boasting of their own “special gifts” and knowledge and they seem to believe they are already “reigning” with Christ. Others, not seen as special as they are and therefore not important. Their elitism extends to those inside as well as outside this developing church. in or out of the developing church.

The verses written for them was to be a reminder that love is the measurement of all their actions. If they are impatient, arrogant and exclusive, then Paul declares they have regressed from the calling to be acting out of love/ agape love for one another.

Paul writes that ALL our gifts are empty if not given with love. Further, the challenge for the Corinthians is that there is a **NOWNESS** being expected from this...for agape requires actions not just words. As Eliza Doolittle would sing in *My Fair Lady*, “Don’t

talk of love, show me." The call is to love one another NOW —in ways that reflect the love that Jesus lived and died for.

Paul is not being subtle and the congregations will sense the sting behind this letter and his disappointment in them. He does not stop loving them, but is willing to risk their rejection or displeasure with the truth he must share. That is tough love!

Luke 4:21-30

Jeremiah and Paul, I believe, in many ways would understand the "tough love" message Jesus gives the congregation that attends the synagogue in Nazareth.

Today's gospel continues the story we heard last week. Jesus after being baptized and tested in the desert, returns to Galilee and begins his ministry of teaching and healing. He is becoming well known. When he returns to his home town of Nazareth and is chosen to read the Torah, his friends and neighbours have some expectations. He does not disappoint them at first but then he declares his *truth*...and his understanding of his mission.

Surely, he would perform some wonders for them, as they have heard he did in Capernaum among the Gentiles. Jesus understands their expectations yet his *truth* brings up the past when prophets like Elijah and Elisha went beyond the people of Israel to feed and heal. In this way, he was declaring that his mission was to be inclusive of the Gentiles.

When even we consider embracing agape (*unconditional love*) and therefore reach out to the "other"- the marginalize in many forms: poor, oppressed, racial different, or those who are sick, depressed, vulnerable and less able to be a "giver" for reasons we do not always know— it can be a challenge our own sameness group or in our community. It was so for Jesus. And ultimately it may cause sacrifice.

Do we "stand up" for the "other" in our community...if some makes a slur against indigenous peoples, or Americans, or Jews at a social gathering ...do we just ignore it and act like we agree as if it okay??

You see, Jesus was not "doing" anything except to say that he did not hold with boundaries that separated Jew from Gentile.....that Yahweh was one who loved and created all and Jesus' call was to be inclusive.

Our story for today ends with the congregation not only expelling him from the synagogue but from the town and even to a cliff!

All this because he not only did not give them what they wanted, he called them to change their ways and to extend themselves to those they considered "other" to see all people as children of God.

Could Jesus have been more subtle, clever, chosen the time more auspiciously?

Jesus calls us over time and over space to follow him, to follow his way of loving his family, his friends, his unnamed followers and even those he never met or touched directly, with a love that knows no limits and counts no cost called agape...

We may do this gently, quietly but sometime we may be called to be firm and public and direct by not only what we say but by what we do. And only you or I can hear what or when we are called to do.

And the day to begin (again) is NOW...

Blessings on your journey with the one who has loved you before you were born!

Amen