

Westminster Sermon – “Knowing in Part”

Sunday, January 31, 2016

Scripture Readings – Jeremiah 1:4-10, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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Our first scripture reading, Jeremiah 1:4-10, tells the story of this ancient prophet’s call as a boy, and the certainty of his childhood experience. In the same way that last week’s reading from Nehemiah with the people *standing up* to hear the law set the tenor for Jesus’ *standing up* in the Nazarene synagogue to read and fulfill scripture, today’s childhood call and certainty in Jeremiah provides a context for the Apostle Paul’s insight in 1 Corinthians 13 that part of growing up is accepting uncertainty. May our hearts and minds be open to the hearing and understanding of God’s Word.

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! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." 7 But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." 9 Then the Lord put out God’s hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. 10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Our second scripture reading is found in the first letter to the Corinthian Church, chapter thirteen. Commonly known as the love chapter and often read at weddings, we marvel at the beauty of these words written by the most influential teacher of Christianity. The Apostle Paul uses the analogy of growing up to acknowledge his partial knowledge and express the depth of his understanding of God. Nurturing unity within a struggling, diverse congregation, Paul reflects on what we do know and what he refers to as the more excellent way – the unchanging nature of God’s love and God’s call to each of us to love one another.

1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have 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 do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

The title of the sermon: “Knowing in Part”

The text: “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.” I Corinthians 13:12

Let us pray: Everlasting God, whose understanding is unsearchable, thank you for loving us beyond our comprehension. Give us the grace to live life *knowing in part*. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

What a joy it is to gather as the Westminster family, to welcome new members into the life of our congregation, to report on our comings and goings in 2015 at our annual meeting, and to break bread together in fellowship at the potluck gathering. As I wrote in my annual report for the 180th Meeting of the Congregation: I am honored to serve as the 18th Pastor and first woman head of staff as we continue to build upon the spirit of advocacy which was so evident in those who founded Westminster as an abolitionist congregation in 1835. How grateful we are for their forward thinking and courage to question the certainty of slavery, and to challenge the status quo of the religion and culture in America at that time.

That spirit of advocacy and the certainty that we *know in part* is alive and well at Westminster. The *Tent of Abraham* class we hosted this month is a testimony to that spirit as over 100 members and friends gathered, with joy and affection, to learn more about the faith traditions of our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters.

Much of my journey growing up has been traveling from a place of certainty to a place of *knowing in part*. Paradoxically, what gave me the courage to take this journey was my *certainty* that I was called by a loving and faithful God. Not unlike Jeremiah, as a young girl I experienced a life-changing call to the ministry. Born into a denomination that did not ordain women, I am grateful for those along the way who encouraged me to continue my journey and for the meaningful ministry and home I have found at Westminster. How indebted am I to the forward thinking men and women who nominated me to serve as your pastor.

It is fair to say that there have been many steps along this path when I felt less sure of myself. This is true for each of us on our individual journeys responding to the call of a loving and faithful God. *Knowing in part* is very much a part of each of our daily walks. Life is full of uncertain times and transition. Faith can and will sustain us during change. In fact, faith affirms and celebrates that life can be lived fully, *knowing in part*.

I think it's true that the older we get and the more we experience life and accept our humanity, the less need we have for control or certainty. It is certainly true that people who are more in control of their own lives have a lesser need to control others.

This is the heart of Paul's counsel to the Corinthians. Reminiscing about his own childhood, he reminds them that part of the process of growing up is giving up some of that illusion of control and certainty we had as children, and accepting that in all our knowledge, theologically or otherwise, we only know in part.

As the *Interpreter's Bible Commentary* points out: *Moreover, the more humans know, if they are also wise, then the more they realize how much they still have to learn... this was one of the lessons that Socrates sought to teach the Athenians in the Agora, and such was the lesson Paul tried to teach his converts in Corinth. Paul does not disparage knowledge that is also needed for the adequate presentation of the gospel. But Paul knew well that there was no finality about knowledge. Theology is constantly undergoing change; so is science, so are literary forms and their expression...*

Unlike knowledge, Paul reminds us that love never grows obsolete. We may outgrow the knowledge of bygone days but we never outgrow the need for love. We may outgrow some of the certainty of our worldview as we grow older, but we never forget the certainty of those first encounters of love... these are the memories that give us the strength to endure the intolerable. Even when those we love die, our love doesn't end. Love binds the life here with the life hereafter. If human love is stronger than death, are we surprised that divine love is stronger still.

Sadly, like the Corinthians, we also get caught up in our knowledge of God rather than God's love. Dr. George Buttrick reminds us, *Had the partial and fragmentary character of our knowledge been better realized, less exclusive claims might have been made by sections of the church as to the finality and completeness of their particular witness, and the spirit of love, for which Paul is pleading, might have been sustained and developed, both to the advantage of the church and to the extension of its witness to the world. Knowledge and prophecy for this great and liberal minded apostle are valuable; they yield true insight. As such they are to be used with judgment and discretion; but they are incomplete. We still only know in part.*

Acknowledging that our "knowing is in part" keeps things in perspective and prevents our religion from becoming a source of pride or dogma used to control others. There was no need for dogmatic assertion in the church of Corinth and there is no need for this today. What we need to be certain about is our spirit of love and respect for others.

During this Epiphany Season of Light let us not forget the white light of knowledge is made up of many colors and is richer because of it. This truth still holds, according to *Interpreter's*. It invites those who name themselves by Christ's name to practice the open mind and to realize that there is still more light and truth to break forth from God's Word. Until that time when we know as fully as we are known, these three remain: faith, hope and love... and the greatest of these is love.

And so, my friends, we can be comforted even "knowing in part" because what we do know about God is the wonder and mystery of God's undying love in Christ Jesus. We can bring strength and comfort in times of uncertainty because what we also know in our partial knowledge is God's desire for us to love one another. So be it. Amen.