Westminster Sermon – "Tongues of Mortals"
Sunday, February 2, 2025
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 as one who is fully known by God even before he was "formed…in his mother's womb." Jeremiah's childhood call provides a context for Apostle Paul's insight in I Corinthians 13 that part of growing up is journeying from certainty to a quiet confidence and acceptance of all we do not know. 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." Amen.

Our second scripture is found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Church, chapter thirteen. Commonly known as the love chapter and often spoken at weddings, these eloquent words were written by the most influential teacher of Christianity. Even as young Jeremiah declares to God that he does not know how to speak, the apostle Paul reminds us that the ability to speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels is not enough if we do not have love. Hear now the Holy word of God.

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. Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Tongues of Mortals"

The text: *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.* I Corinthians 13:1

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for reminding us time and time again what is required. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The folklore my mom liked to tell about our family is that I did not speak until I was three years old. Apparently as the youngest child, my ability to point and communicate nonverbally initially worked well. When I finally learned "the tongues of mortals" I talked quite a lot and one day exclaimed to my mother, "Talking is the fun"ist" thing I ever learned to do."

The ability to speak is essential in life and I marvel at those who master several languages, not to mention the languages of music and technology. Learning another language widens one's worldview and provides perspective on the limitations of any one language. It makes us less small minded and provincial. The varying intonations, nuances. cadences and tones of each language and the different meaning these can give to the spoken word speaks to the richness, wonder, and beauty of language.

The explanation of why the world's people speak different languages is found in the Book of Genesis. In the story of the Tower of Babel following the flood in chapter eleven, God observes the hubris, the haughtiness, the exclusivity of the people as they build a tower to the heavens and so confounds and confuses their speech scattering them across the earth. The humbling diversity of language is a reminder that we are not the center of the universe and there is much in the world we do not know or understand.

In whatever tongue one speaks, the Apostle Paul reminds us that *without love* even the most articulate person becomes like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Likewise, *without love* people with profound theological insight and total faith amount to nothing; *without love* even extravagant benefactors of the poor and those who have sufferings of which to boast gain nothing.

It seems Paul saw in these young, enthusiastic, well intended followers of Christ the same hubris as God saw in the tower builders in Genesis. The Corinthians were not the first, and certainly not the last who became overzealous in their faith, and in their enthusiasm, overlooked the effect their actions might have on someone else or on the community. Yet more than their zeal, the thing that troubled Paul was their arrogance and genuine feeling of superiority about being "in the know" specifically with regards to spiritual gifts – who has them, who does not, and which ones are more important. Paul believed in his heart that the sense of superiority and division at Corinth were caused by a loveless spirituality. In I Corinthians 13, Paul reminds us that a faith without love is meaningless. Rigid religiosity that is mean and lives with the expectation of privilege does not reflect the gospel of Christ.

Respected, conservative journalist, David Brooks wrote an article for the *Atlantic* in August 2023 titled, "How America Got Mean." No one denies that we've become a mean-spirited culture. We've become increasingly rude, cruel, abusive and violent. Whether it's toward a waiter at a restaurant, a nurse at a hospital, a teacher at a school or road rage on the interstate, we've become… mean. Coupled with this is our increasing lack of compassion and empathy for others. In 2000, two-thirds of American households gave to charity. In 2018, fewer than half did.

Brooks reflects on reasons for our growing meanness, from technology and overstimulation on social media to sociology as we are less involved in the community and becoming more isolated to economics with the growing disparity and financial inequality leaving people afraid, alienated and pessimistic. Brooks also includes demographics as a cause for our meanness. Once a dominantly white culture, as we become a more diverse country, millions of white Americans are in a panic fearing they will lose their privilege.

The White Christian Nationalism movement has evolved out of this fear with a strong rhetoric articulating a meanness within people of faith. The movement is built around the idea that Christians are called to a new transformation of the United States. These are Christians who want to revolutionize the way our country looks, and to make it great again in terms of being a Christian nation. By investing in spiritual warfare, through the misuse of scripture, and with the goal of a monochromatic, white, male culture, they believe they are called to fight a cosmic battle between good and evil. People of color, refugees, immigrants, women not falling in line with traditional values, and the LGTBQ community are being scapegoated by these tongues of mortals and placed in the category of evil.

One cannot help but see parallels between today's rhetoric and the dispute among early Christians in Corinth. The solution is not a further honing of the gifts or the spiritual warfare dialogues, rather Paul encourages "a still more excellent way," the essential, practical, and enduring way of love which Paul eloquently outlines in chapter 13.

The composition of the chapter is a picture of love in action. Love does some things and resists doing other things. Love is not an abstract idea: love acts. Love expresses itself in down-to-earth contexts, where it refuses to stoop to petty retaliation, demonstrates patience, resists keeping a scorecard, and remains hopeful. Love speaks truth to power and protects all God's children.

At the heart of Paul's counsel to the Corinthians, he reminds them that part of the process of growing up is giving up some of that self-centeredness, certainty, simple reasoning, and illusion of control we had as children and accepting that in all our language and knowledge, theologically or otherwise, we only know the truth in part and see a dim reflection of ourselves.

Unlike knowledge and language, Paul reminds us that love never grows obsolete. There was no need for pedantic and dogmatic assertion in Corinth, and there is no need today. Where we need certainty is in our love and respect for one another. Until the time we no longer see in a mirror dimly and we know as fully as we are known, "faith, hope and love will abide. and the greatest of these is love." Amen.