

Westminster Sermon – “If I Speak in Tongues”

Sunday, January 30, 2022

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 the Apostle Paul's insight in 1 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 reading 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: “If I Speak in Tongues”

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.* 1 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 over the years 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 subtle 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.

After summarizing the spiritual gifts that were at the heart of their dispute in chapter 12, Paul explains that the gifts were given for the benefit of all to build up the community with a common purpose. He then exhorts them to “*a still more excellent way.*” Paul believed in his heart that the sense of superiority and division at Corinth were caused by a loveless spirituality. Therefore, the solution is not a further honing of the gifts, but the essential, practical, and enduring way of love which Paul eloquently outlines in chapter 13.

The composition is a picture of love in action. Love becomes the subject of all the verbs. Love does some things and resists doing other things. Love is not an abstract idea: love acts. It expresses itself in down-to-earth contexts, where it refuses to stoop to petty retaliation, demonstrates patience, resists keeping a scorecard, remains hopeful. The impression one gets is that love primarily functions in situations of stress and conflict, anything but the romanticized version so popularly held.

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, and illusion of control we had as children, and accepting that in all our knowledge, theologically or otherwise, as well as our language, 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. However, 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 and language, Paul reminds us that love never grows obsolete. We may outgrow the knowledge and the words we spoke in bygone days; however, 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 on our faith journeys. These are the memories that give us the strength to persevere the changes and losses along the way.

Sadly, like the Corinthians, we also get caught up in our knowledge of God rather than God's love. Theologian and former pastor at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, The Rev. 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.*

There was no need for 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.