

Sermon January 31, 2016 Jeremiah 1:4-10 I Corinthians 13
“God’s Call: Tough, Effective Love”

In the reading from Jeremiah, we heard that God knew Jeremiah before forming him in the womb...and that God had a special task for Jeremiah to carry out, a difficult one. God's love was for Jeremiah and for all of God's people, and because of God's love and the people's lack of love, God was going to bring about harsh punishment. It would be Jeremiah's job to proclaim what God was going to do; he would have to stand up before his own nation as they fought off the Babylonians trying to invade them and tell them that the only way they could be saved was to lay down their weapons and surrender to the attacking army. Talk about a hard task! Jeremiah suffered terribly. His countrymen called him a traitor. He was beaten, thrown down into a well, and later imprisoned. In spite of all this abuse, however, Jeremiah remained faithful to God. There were times when he questioned God, calling God "a deceitful brook" for assigning him such a disheartening task. But God was with Jeremiah, and Jeremiah remained faithful to God. The love between them, and the love God had for God's people, prevailed. The love of God visible in Jeremiah's life and work was not a cuddly, sweet, romantic love; it was a practical, persistent, hard, and effective love. It finally brought about the restoration of God's people.

The apostle Paul wrote about love to church people in Corinth who were having a great deal of difficulty and conflict among themselves. It seems that the Corinthian Christians were caught up in "one-upmanship" with each other, more focused on status and power struggles than they were on what should have united them, Jesus Christ. Today's lesson has Paul calling the people to attend to the three things that he understood to be integral to the proper functioning of the church, the Body of Christ: FAITH, HOPE, and LOVE. Without these three things, the church cannot be effective in the world. Throughout the centuries, Christians have had the most trouble with *love*.

An old story tells that long ago a good Christian man stood at a street corner, quite upset. A passerby stopped and asked him what was the matter. He replied, "Do you see that stone in the middle of the street? Since I got here this morning, at least ten people have stumbled over it. But not one of them took the trouble to remove it so that others wouldn't stumble!" (pause) Effective love would have taken the time and trouble to move the stone, not just complain about others who did not! ...

Effective love. Reminds me of when I was taking a class at the General Theological Seminary in NYC many years ago. The professor told of a sidewalk that was dangerously uneven. The owner of the house kept blankets and a first-aid kit near the front door, and would run outside every time someone fell and offer to help the person up and give him/her a band-aid. "I'm so sorry you fell! Let me help you!!" The professor asked, "Did the home owner show love?" And the answer was, NO. If the homeowner really loved the people, the homeowner would have fixed the sidewalk so that nobody else fell. Effective love.

We who are followers of Jesus Christ must be effective in our loving. We are called to be realistic, mature, and practical. Effective love seeks to eliminate the causes of pain, not just to hold the hand of the one who suffers. God calls the church to be effective, that is, to live out what we believe. Too often, the church has the right words, the proper creeds, but not much else to

make a difference in the world. Christ's church is called to be effective, to make a difference in people's lives. (pause)

Paul stated, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, and thought like one, but now that I am an adult, I put an end to childish things... " William Willimon suggests that this means that faithful Christianity is not for babies. It isn't easy, for it is not "doing what comes naturally." (*Pulpit Resource*, vol. 44, no. 1, p. 24) It is putting one's entire self on the line, reaching out where it's easier not to, with a heart for the very things Paul put forth: Faith, hope, and love. Especially love. Love is working to bring about good for the other person.

I am friends with a young doctor who has the task of supervising participants in a year-long training program for hospital workers. One of this doctor's supervisees has been a disappointment from day one, unwilling to follow rules and procedures, unwise in decisions, basically a wipe-out in the program. When I spoke with my friend, she shared at length her frustration over this participant, then went on to list several criticisms. I asked the doctor if there was anything the participant was GOOD at. The doctor scoffed and said, "That's not my job. I am supposed to keep this person from hurting someone." Our conversation turned elsewhere, but my heart remained troubled. As I look back over my own experiences and the people I have known through the years, it has been the ones who could see my mistakes and faults but still see good things in me who helped me the most. Those who simply cut me down hurt me. Those who offered tough criticism that was intended to help me become better able to use the gifts I have, offered me love and hope and a path forward.

Of course faith is important! If we have faith we trust something that we cannot see or prove. We find out whether we have it when we risk stepping out beyond the seemingly secure boundaries of our lives into a darkness that we cannot see, trusting that a hand will be there to catch us, to guide us, to lift us up. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the promise of things not yet seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

HOPE is another part of our call to follow Jesus. To hope is to see the possibility of something better, and to live as if that something better will be tomorrow's reality. The scriptures speak of the old dreaming dreams and the young having visions of the possibilities of God's new work. God has given us the ability to imagine what can be, to envision possibilities for God's coming kingdom.

Our hope determines our horizon. If I look only to myself, then my own failings and the hurts others provide me soon become the total equation of my life. If I hope in *God's* action in my life and in this world, the equation and the focal length are infinitely longer and fuller. God's plan goes beyond our disappointments and limitations. Hope!

But, Paul told the Corinthian Christians: "The greatest of these is love."

Years ago a friend of mine worked in a wealthy and prestigious NYC church with one of the most gifted preachers of the day. The preacher could spin words in such a way that to hear him was to be amazed at his intellect and the breadth of his concepts. I still pour over one of the man's books at

regular intervals, hoping that some of his gift will give me a preaching idea. As eloquent as he was, however, the preacher came up quite short in other areas. His words were the words of angels, but his deeds often came across as unloving, even harsh for those with whom he worked. After one particularly difficult meeting of the governing board of the congregation, one member of the board broke into tears, sobbing, "We have everything in our church, but we don't have love!" The tongues of men and angels were evident, but the lack of love was breaking the congregation into terrible divisions as they tried to deal with their pastor.

Last week after our worship service a few of us watched the final session of preacher/scholar Adam Hamilton's video series, "When Christians Get it Wrong." This session was entitled, "When Christians Get It RIGHT." In the video, Hamilton told of a comment Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., made about Jesus' parable of The Good Samaritan, where a man on the roadside lay gravely wounded by robbers, and a priest and then a Levite (both on their way to worship) avoided the injured man, but then a foreigner, a hated Samaritan, stopped and saved him at great cost to himself. Dr. King's comment has "nudged" me all week. It went something like this: The two men who passed by without helping the injured man were asking the wrong question. They were asking, "What might happen to me if I stop and help the man?" The question they should have asked is this: "What will happen to this man if I do NOT stop and help him?" There is the kind of love Jesus Christ came to live out and to call us to risk living.

God knew Jeremiah through and through, and called him to use his gifts to challenge God's people to realize that God had a plan for them even in the midst of the great suffering they would be forced to endure as punishment for their lack of faith. Tough love.

God knows us. God knows how easy it is for us to get tied up in the question, "What might happen to me if I try to help?" God knows how hard it is for us to trust that God really is here, with us, calling us to recognize our gifts and strengths, that we may dare use them for the good of someone else. God understands how hard it is for us, but our call still stands. "Love the Lord your God, and use your life to love your neighbor as much as you love yourself."

Jesus came to show us God's love. And he did. But it was not a mushy, feel-good, every now and then love; it was a love that tells us what God wants, that challenges us as to how we live out love for others, and that promises the presence of our Lord to each of us forever, through good and bad, through "warm fuzzies and cold pricklies," through our every breath and beyond.

May faith, hope, and love be yours as God reveals to you your salvation. May each of us listen for GOD's call to us. May we see the pain of those around us. And may we be strong enough in our faith and our hope to ask the question, "What will happen to this person if I do not help?" By this, may we become for others a taste of the effective love of Jesus Christ. Amen.