

The 4th Sunday after the Epiphany, February 3, 2019. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church.

Nigel Taber-Hamilton Jeremiah 1:4-10, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30

Today's gospel is the familiar story about Jesus' first visit to his home town after he has "gone public" about his self-understanding as Messiah – as "the Anointed One." Or, perhaps, if we accept the meaning behind the actual description of his baptism, then it's his hometown visit after God has "gone public" about him.

It begins amazingly well, and ends atrociously. His fellow Nazarenes go from lauding him to wanting to kill him! No half measures here, it would seem! What happened? First Century Mediterranean culture was based on kinship relationships. Family was the only thing that really mattered – everyone else was treated with suspicion. You honored your family relationships; you helped family when they needed it, and you took advantage of their success when they had it.

That was the privilege afforded by being related to someone successful, or famous. Nazareth was tiny – maybe 20 houses; almost certainly everyone was related; one big family. They rejoiced at Jesus' success, focusing only on the magical healings, and – rather like a pop star's entourage – they wanted a piece of the action. After all, that was the privilege that came with being a Nazarene!

Jesus is having none of it, and says so. Essentially, the message is this: "You don't get it; God's reign isn't about magical healings, it doesn't work on privilege, it's about justice for the least and the lost. You're just like our ancestors who thought they could manipulate God."

You can see why it might not have gone over very well, can't you?!! It's a stark reminder of how you can go wrong if you don't ask some questions of your own culture, if you assume that the way things are is the way they've always been, and always will be, if you don't say to yourself "how does the way I understand my world match up with the vision of Jesus and Paul?" So Luke is telling us "this is not how you function in a community of faith."

Contrast that with our continuing journey through Paul's first letter to the Corinthian community. Last week we heard Paul's central description of the emerging community of Jesus followers as being predicated on the

bringing together of a radically diverse group into a unified whole that was not just like the body of Christ, it was then, and is still today, actually the body of Christ.

Here, for Paul, is a mystic communion of individuals who, despite representing the extremes of social, ethnic and gender identity can be – must be – one. And they are one, they are the body of Christ, because those social and ethnic and gender distinctions dissolve “in Christ.” There is, for Paul, a diversity of role, but an equality of person.

Paul, this week, offers us the next step in community, after telling us how it should be structured. It’s the opposite of the gospel. Have you heard it before? It’s probably the best known passage from any of Paul’s writings – the one that’s requested more than any other for weddings. And, as I said before, it’s the central part of a three-part structure of 1 Corinthians. The first part is about faith – what’s at the heart of our common life as followers of Jesus; the third part is about hope – the Christian hope in the resurrection; the central part, intentionally put between the other two, is this one – love.

Everything Paul says hinges on this, everything is built on this. The faith we share has no meaning unless it’s predicated on love. What sort of faith, after all, would be worth anything if it were predicated on hatred, or indifference? And the hope we share is the same: what sort of a thing would resurrection life be if it lacked the gifted connectedness of love?

And that’s exactly what Paul says in this passage! Eloquence, power, knowledge, outward displays of humility and generosity – all worthless if not expressed and exercised within the context of love.

To have meaning, to discover joy, to encounter others with authenticity – these all require love. I think there are at least two things about this that we would all acknowledge – based on experience – as self-evident:

We know on a really deep level that this is true, and
We know that its easier said than done.

Those two things – the centrality of love, and the fact that we will know it’s authentic when it requires effort on our part.

And, let’s face it, few Christian communities are strangers to the kind of

division in communities that Paul speaks about – social, emotional, theological, political. This community is no exception; division isn't a unique marker; it simply says we are all human beings.

How you journey into the future will be determined by the extent to which you examine the structure of this community, seek to bring it in some measure into accord with Paul's vision of the Body of Christ, and how much you seek to live the life of this community through love, the greatest of the gifts we have received from God, yet the one we are so often least able to emulate.