

*Come, Holy Spirit, giver of gifts: open our ears to hear you speak to us. Amen.*

They were so sure they knew him. They had him pegged.

"Look at Joseph's son, how he's filled out – he's so grown up."

"I thought he was never going to leave home... But now look at him."

"Well, you know, he had to look after his mother. Such a good boy."

"But have you heard about what he's been doing?"

All those people he healed in Capernaum?"

"That's nothing – did you hear about Cana? They ran out of wine at that wedding – and they say he turned ordinary water into wine – good wine!"

"It's about time he came back here, shared some of that good stuff with us."

After all, we know where he comes from. We know him."

They thought they had the 411 on the miracle-worker; they could contain him.

But when he stepped outside the lines they drew for him – look out.

it's hard to imagine how they got so mad so fast, but ugly things happen

when strong emotions sweep a crowd. Jesus had so flipped their expectations, so badly disappointed and insulted them, they went berserk.

We often try to expel that which threatens our sense of security... so to the cliff.

This is Jesus' first visit to his hometown since he began his ministry.

So when he starts talking about how prophets can't get any respect in their own

home towns, and how the great prophets Elijah and Elisha's miracles helped foreigners, gentiles, not their own people – they got mad. Dangerously mad.

Familiarity can keep us from truly knowing someone.

They think they know him so well, they can't see who he really is.

But they only know who he used to be, not who he is now.

What we see happen in Nazareth that day is Not-Love,

what you get when love is absent.

Jesus is no longer a person, but an object – first of adulation, then of rage.

If you don't know someone, see them truly, it's hard to truly love them.

I believe we have a stronger yearning to be known than even to be loved.

That's why my favorite line in Paul's discussion of love in I Corinthians 13 is:

*"Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."*

Can you imagine – being fully known? And still loved?

That's it, right there. That is the promise of the Christian life – that we can be completely known, the good, the bad, and the ugly, and yet completely loved; that we are called into relationship with the One who made us, who knew us before we were formed in our mother's womb.

The prophet Jeremiah reports God saying to him:

*"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you..."*

Psalm 139 says, *Lord, you have searched me and known me;*

*You know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar... You are acquainted with all my ways...*

In some ways it is our life's work to come to know – and to love – who it is that God sees when God looks at us; God who knows who we truly are without all the layers that life and wounds and people and thwarted desires can add to us.

Jesus did not come to invite us into a religion, but into a relationship.

When he walked by and called his disciples from what they were doing, he was inviting them into relationship. When he said to people,

*"Come, follow me,"* he was saying, *"Get to know me; let me know you."*

That's why religion without intimate connection –

with one another, with God – is a brittle, sterile thing.

That's what Paul is saying in this beautiful and familiar passage.

It's often read at weddings, but Paul wasn't writing about romantic love.

He was writing about love in the community of faith, and the love of God.

It doesn't matter how spiritually gifted you are, he said,

or what amazing ministries you can accomplish, if you don't have love.

It doesn't even matter how deep your faith is, if you don't love God and neighbor.

And here's what love looks like: it pours itself out for the beloved,

doesn't insist on its own prerogatives.

An agapé love – agapé being the word for that love that is not erotic, not familial, but unconditional; love that seeks the delight of the beloved, and not its own way.

This is true of churches as well as people. If a church is filled with love,

you can taste it when you walk in. If its emphasis is on tradition, or politeness, or the beauty of its sanctuary and worship style, you can feel that too...

and it's not very appealing. That's not something that makes you want to reorient your commitments and open yourself to the Life of God.

What if we make it our priority to ask, "Does our love show through this ministry?"

This worship style? This form of leadership? This outreach?"

If our worship flows beautifully without a hint of warmth, where's the love?

If vestry meetings are all business with no personal interaction, where's the love? Giving away food is an act of love. But if clients come to our Food Pantry and are greeted with rules and not welcome, where's the love? Happily, those who distribute food on Fridays do have an attitude of love.

Our two churches, like every church I've ever met, wants to welcome more young people, more families and children and what is now called "rising generations." Well friends, what harried younger folk in our time want is what everyone wants: Love. To be loved. To be embraced in love, to be enfolded in a community of love. In her Convention address yesterday, Bishop Mariann talked about intentionally reaching rising generations – and churches that make this their number one priority find themselves growing. She said,

*investigators identified 6 core commitments of congregations that have successfully engaged 15-29 year olds and as a result are growing spiritually, missionally and numerically. You'll be glad to know that the six commitments do not require your congregation to become something it's not. But they do invite you into deep relationships with the young people in your life and to reach out to the young people in your neighborhoods. For those of us who are no longer young, they ask us to gracefully give up our primacy in congregational life. The commitments are:*

1. *Share leadership to receive the gifts of others, especially young people.*

2. *Empathize with today's young people, stepping into their shoes.*

Imagine how hard it is to grow up in a global pandemic and civil unrest.

3. *Take Jesus' message seriously and welcome young people into a Jesus-centered way of life.*

No one is interested in religion. They want the real thing, relationship with God. We can't share what we don't have... so let's go deeper.

4. *Nurture warmth in your community and aim for meaningful peer and intergenerational relationships.*

Does someone coming into our churches encounter warmth or distance?

5. *Prioritize young people (and families) and look for creative ways to tangibly support, resource and invite them in every facet of your congregation.*

Do we want to see children grow in faith? Will we offer our time.

6. *Be good neighbors, and provide opportunities for and support young people to serve others, locally, nationally, and globally.*

Outreach and justice ministries are some of the best ways to connect with young families and people in our region; church grows out of community.

As we seek the focus of our mission, let's ponder what it would look like to measure every single thing we do by how well it shows our love.

A lot of us love the song, "Love is spoken here."

We're thinking about painting that message on our roofline.

We need to make that one hundred percent true.

*Amen.*

### **Luke 4:21-30**

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and began to say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

### **I Corinthians 13:1-13**

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. 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. 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.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 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. 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

### **Jeremiah 1:4-10**

The word of the LORD came to me saying,

“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.”

Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” 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, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.”

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth;

and the LORD said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth.

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.”