

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

In Jeremiah's day, the work of a prophet was often a life or death matter – it was something you did because you loved God, and you loved God's people.

First, there was the fact that prophets often told their audiences things that they didn't want to hear when they called them out on all the ways that they turned their back on God and one another.

Second, there was always the question of whether you were a true or a false prophet. How did people know that you were really speaking for God? That was the work of prophets, after all – they weren't just preachers – they were people who served as a channel of communication between the human and divine worlds. Prophets were people called by God to speak truth to power, and in Jeremiah's time, true prophets were understood to literally be speaking the words of God.

It was because of these two concerns—speaking truth and prophetic legitimacy—that prophets, including Jeremiah, developed narratives explaining their call to prophecy. These narratives followed a common formula: *the revelation, the divine commission, the objection, the divine response* and finally *the commission*.

Now stick with me here, but I'd like you all to look at your bulletins and follow along with me as we look at Jeremiah's call.

First there is the revelation: *The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah.* Next we find the divine commission: *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.* After that is the objection: *I said "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."* The divine response follows: *But the Lord said to me, "Do not say 'I am only a boy' for you shall go to all 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."* 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."* Finally it ends with the commission: *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.*

The very structure of the call narrative is designed as a defense against the risks of prophecy. How can you be angry at what the prophet is saying if he is simply passing on the words of God? How can you think that he is a false prophet? He didn't want this – in fact he told God that when he was called – but God didn't listen to him! Nope, in fact God told Jeremiah he was chosen for this before he was even formed in the womb! Can you really argue with that?

The work of a prophet was indeed dangerous, and sometimes they died for speaking the truth of God to the powers of the world.

And so in Luke's Gospel we arrive in Nazareth and enter into the story of another 'prophet.'

In last week's Gospel Jesus went to the synagogue and read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

His next words were electric: *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

The first response of those who heard him was positive – they were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They had no doubt heard reports of Jesus' teaching elsewhere and might reasonably expect that a prophet endowed by the Spirit of God would favor his hometown with his mightiest works. Thus they would share in the fame of the prophet from Nazareth.

It is with a sense of wonder then, that they question, *Is this not Joseph's son?* Jesus understands the crowds' positive response; they are eager for him to begin to do the works of God's grace among them, and a bit miffed that he has already done wonderful things in Capernaum.

But here is where Jesus 'speaks truth' – if not to power, then 'truth in love.' Because Jesus understands their desire for power, and the benefits of 'having their own prophet,' and yet his message is one that is much bigger than simply his own community. The issue at hand was a difference in the way they understood the scriptures.

The people of Jesus' hometown read the scriptures as promises of God's exclusive covenant with them, a covenant that involved promises of deliverance from their oppressors.

Jesus came along announcing deliverance, but it was not a national deliverance – rather it was a promise of God's liberation for **all** the poor and oppressed regardless of nationality, gender, or race.

That is the point he makes in the two examples he uses of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Just as Jeremiah was called as a prophet to the nations, Jesus too is called to share the news of God's love and grace far and wide.

When the radical inclusiveness of Jesus' announcement became clear to those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth, their commitment to their own community boundaries took precedence over their joy that God had sent a prophet among them. In the end, because they were not open to the prospect of others sharing the bounty of God's deliverance, they themselves were unable to receive it – and so they chased Jesus out of town. Truly, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.

The vision that Jesus offered that day, the Gospel that he preached throughout his ministry, was one of the expansive grace and love of God for all. And that takes us to another community, one which grew in the wake of Jesus' death and resurrection, and one that was struggling with how to live in right relation with one another.

Today we read possibly the most famous excerpt there is from 1 Corinthians – the passage on love.

A favorite for weddings, it is easy to simply take this scripture as a precious tribute to love idealized. But Paul's intention when writing this beautifully lyrical prose was anything but romantic.

For Paul, the Christian faith was lived in community. The individual was never simply, and singly, related to God. If *faith* is Paul's code word for right relation with God, then *love* is Paul's code word for right relation with others.

Love, the proper caring for one another, is the necessary expression of faith, because faith expresses itself in love. Caring for other believers, building them up, encouraging them, consoling and even warning them (as prophets do), are not options for believers; they are a **requirement** of faith. This is what Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians, where it seems that some in the community have focused their attention on themselves and on God, but have ignored, neglected, or disregarded others.

Paul recognizes that the very constitution of community requires a sort of give-and-receive transaction between individuals and the community. To be a believer apart from community is inconceivable for Paul. Therefore, believers must be ready to accommodate community.

This is often problematic for us and our cultural context, as integration into community causes us to override selfishness and the natural desire to seek what seems so clearly one's own self-interest.

While it may seem extreme to us, Paul was so committed to the community as the matrix of the life of faith, that when he saw a conflict between the rights of the individual and the rights of the community, he regularly recommended that the individual eschew the pursuit of individual rights and choose the community's well-being instead. This is as radical a shift for us as it was for the community in Corinth to which Paul wrote this letter so many centuries ago.

But for all his concern for the health of the community, Paul never denigrated the importance of the believer's individuality. Variety and difference are not sacrificed for community. Rather, Paul strove to integrate the distinctiveness of individuals and relished the importance of difference to the wholesomeness of the fellowship. Thus last week's reading from this letter was about the different members of the body - many members and yet one body. Every individual person is welcome, is important, and is even necessary to the body of Christ. **Paul does not seek uniformity, but genuine unity in community.**

It is to this purpose, unity in community, that Paul spoke of love. As stated before, for Paul love was right relation with others. And so he begins this section of his letter.

He holds up things that are dear to himself and the community: speaking in tongues, prophetic powers and faith. And yet he claims that without love, these are nothing. The point, subtly but powerfully made, is that no matter how magnificent the accomplishment, power, or action – when love is missing, the exercise in question becomes vain, selfish, and fruitless.

This is because love's quest can never begin with the question, *What's in it for me?* Instead, love looks first to the other and asks, *What is best for you? What would help you?*

This self-giving love creates community. Love is a two-way street that provides a context of mutuality, understanding, and relatedness between each person and God. We can bear all things because we are linked in love.

My hope and prayer for us as we come to our annual parish meeting today, and as we anticipate the mission and ministry we are called to in the coming year, is that we will hold true to the bonds of self-giving love. That we will continue to ask each other *what is best for you?* That we will continue to welcome the prophetic Gospel of Jesus, and allow it stir up in us a desire to expand our community instead of tightening our circle like those in Nazareth so long ago. And I pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide us in all that we do—as individuals and a community.

~ AMEN ~