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**3 February 2019**

**Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany (Year C)**

**St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven CT**

I don't know if you've noticed, but Valentine's Day is coming up.

If you've been to a store recently, it's hard to miss it. There are hearts and displays everywhere.

And they've been that way for months! The week after Christmas, I went to a Target and there were already valentines on the shelves and hearts hung from the ceiling.

Now, I'm kind of a curmudgeon when it comes to Valentine's Day. I don't really celebrate it, I don't buy flowers or chocolates, and I certainly don't go out to dinner or attempt to leave my favorite spot on the couch next to my dog.

But, if there's anything good that comes from all of the Valentine's day chaos, I think it's that Valentine's day gets us thinking about love.

Seeing all of the hearts everywhere might remind us that "love is all around us."<sup>i</sup> It may, at its best, encourage us to be more open to love, wherever we find it.

And love is a good way of looking at both of our New Testament readings from today. Now, you might not have noticed it, but both of our texts today are about love.

And these two texts tell us how God loves, and how we are called to both love God and others.

First, our Gospel reading.

If you've been tracking so far, you might be wondering how the story of Jesus's people driving him out of the town and attempting to throw him off a cliff is about love.

It seems like kind of a stretch. But bear with me.

This week's Gospel reading is a continuation of last week's, and it doesn't make much sense without the first half of the story.

The people's attempt to kill Jesus is a *response* to his teaching in the Synagogue. In the first half of this story, Jesus is in the synagogue one day when he takes the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, and reads a bit of it out loud. Addressing the congregation, he says:

"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."<sup>ii</sup>

Then, Jesus tells them that these words have been fulfilled today, in him. We picked up the story today at this exact moment.

He tells them that he is God's anointed, the Messiah, and that he is going to change everything about the way that their world works.

Then, in today's reading, he keeps going. Recognizing that the people are questioning whether he could have been sent by God, he tells them he is. And he speaks like a prophet, like someone who intimately knows God.

It is in response to this that the people get angry.

"This is Joseph's son!" They say to themselves.

"He's not a prophet. We know him. We've seen him. We know that he is not God's anointed."

This is blasphemy. Plus, he's threatening to upend their entire social order. He's telling them that he's going to release prisoners! Heal the sick! Let the oppressed be free of their oppressions!

And so they try to kill him. Because what Jesus represents is too threatening to every thing they think they know about how God, the world, and their lives should work.

In Christian theology, we say that Jesus Christ is God incarnate.

In simpler language, this means that Jesus, who himself is fully God, tells us and shows us who God is.

And that he does this by coming to us as a human being, as someone who is like us.

Another way to say this is that Jesus Christ is perfect love in human form.

Because God is love, as we sang at the outset of this service. And Jesus Christ comes to earth to show us and tell us who God is, who he himself is.

He comes to show us how much He loves us, and the world.

God reaches out to us, and in response we try to kill God.

That's what this story tells us. Jesus comes to us, proclaims God's love as this freedom and joy to the poor and oppressed, and people are so threatened by him that, in rage and fear and unknowing, attempt to toss him off the closest cliff they can find.

I think it's easy for most of us sitting here today to think we wouldn't be in that crowd.

To think that we would recognize the goodness of Jesus's message and welcome it.

But as I've sat with this passage this week, and let it trouble my own heart, I've started to wonder if that's really the case.

I think that many – not all, but many – of the people in this room would respond in the same way this crowd did.

In the same way a later crowd in Luke's gospel calls for the execution of Jesus on the cross.

And so the lesson about love from our Gospel reading today is this: we are resistant to God's perfect love reaching out to us.

Now to our second reading from today. Paul's description of love from his first letter to the Corinthians.

In my experience, if people who are generally unfamiliar with the Bible know any passage of Scripture, it's this one.

And that's because this passage tells us exactly what love is:

Love is being patient

Love is showing mercy

Love is not envying, boasting, being arrogant or being rude

Love is yielding to another's needs

It's not being irritable or holding onto resentment

Love does not take delight in wrongdoing but takes its joy from the truth

Love is long-suffering. Love believes all things. It hopes all things.

It endures anything and everything, and love will last forever.

That was from a translation other than the one we read, but I like it better because it captures that love is active.<sup>iii</sup>

Love is in doing. It's in our actions and choices. That's what we learn from this passage.

And if God is love, if Jesus is love incarnate, this passage tells us how God acts towards us.

Towards us as a Christian community, and towards us as individuals.

God is patient with you and kind with you.

God shows mercy towards you.

God yields to your needs.

God is not irritable and has no resentment at all towards you. Towards all of us.

In the synagogue, in our Gospel reading, Jesus is showing us his love by proclaiming God's justice.

Cornel West, a professor and activist, says that "justice is what love looks like in public."<sup>iv</sup>

And that's what Jesus is doing when he proclaims freedom, healing, and liberation of the oppressed.

He's proclaiming the effects of God's love, of His love, for the whole world and the order.

Because "justice is what love looks like in public."

But many of us resist that call. We are shaken by it and it scares us. We are threatened by God's love.

So we try to eradicate it.

There is good news in this, I promise.

Because Jesus keeps loving us, even when we reject him.

God keeps reaching out to us, even as we shove God away.

God is long-suffering with us. God does not resent us, even when we do the wrong things.

God believes in us. God has hopes for us.

God can endure everything.

Even the cross, even when human beings attempt to kill the perfect love that has reached out to us.

When we push God out of our world, God is stronger than our opposition.

Because God won't let anything stand between us and God's love.

As Paul says in one of his other letters, "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."<sup>v</sup>

So, the good news here is that God's love is stronger than anything and that it doesn't give up.

God loves you and is not going to give up on you.

There is nothing you have done or will do that will make God stop loving you.

Even that crowd that tried to kill Jesus. Jesus did not for a second stop loving them.

There's also a second piece to this good news.

And that's that God's love is so powerful that it empowers us to love and serve others rightly.

If think sometimes when we read this description of love, we run the risk of turning it into a to-do list.

We think, "okay, I'm supposed to love others. That means that

I have to be patient, and kind.

I can't be jealous or boast or be arrogant or rude or irritable or resentful. Those things need to just be gone from my life. I can do that.

I have to yield to other people's needs.

I think I can rejoice in the truth."

And maybe we do really well with this to-do list for a while.

But then, at some point, you don't.

You are impatient with your partner or children or siblings.

You utter an unkind word.

The temptation to jealousy overwhelms you and you give in. You're arrogant or rude or resentful.

You find that on your own, you can't love perfectly all the time.

Now, maybe you resolve to try harder. You work to be more open to God's love reaching out to you.

You resolve to love the people around you better, and you want to do justice, to show love in public.

You set your mind to it, and you're really going to succeed.

And then, again you fail.

The okay news of today's lessons about love is that God is patient with you. Jesus shows you mercy and allows you to try again.

God does not hold your failures over your head, God is not keeping a spreadsheet filled with each of your errors.

But the better part of this, the true Good news, is that God empowers you to love as God loves.

God doesn't expect you to do it on your own.

God comes beside you, and gives you power and grace and guidance and strength to love others, and to work for justice.

God can transform you from a member of the crowd who tries to kill Jesus, to one of those disciples that follows him.

A disciple that knows and trusts and believes deeply in the love of God.

And only after knowing that love is sent out into the world.

God makes it possible for you to love like God loves. That's the only way we can do it, friends

So, my hope and prayer for all of us here today is that we come to know God's love for us.

That every person here would know how high and long and wide and deep God's love for you is.<sup>vi</sup>

That you would rest in that knowledge, in the love of God.

And through that assurance of God's love, God would enable you to show and give love in the world.

Because loving like God loves is not a matter of will.

You can't try really hard and get it right.

God has to empower you, through the Holy Spirit and the love of the triune God for you.

And only then can we work for God's justice, and to live that love in public.

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<sup>i</sup> *Love Actually*.

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 4:18-19, NRSV.

<sup>iii</sup> Translation my own.

<sup>iv</sup> Initially, I misattributed this quote to bell hooks based on an internet image, though in subsequent research I have discovered the source of this wisdom is Cornel West, not bell hooks.

<sup>v</sup> Romans 8:31-39, paraphrased.

<sup>vi</sup> Ephesians 3:18.