

Epiphany 4

1 Corinthians 13, Luke 4.21-30

Last week we heard Paul's counterscript of *one*: *One God, One Spirit, One Christ, One Body*. His letter to the Corinthian church is as necessary for us and our divisions and it was for them in their divisions. So chapter 12 is all about how we are part of one body, and everybody has a place, everybody belongs, and everybody has gifts and contributions that are needed for a healthy, whole body.

In chapter 13 he builds on the counterscript of *one* by talking about *love*. The love that Paul is describing isn't a Valentine's Day card kind of love. It isn't a soft, easy, kumbya love. It isn't a feel-good, let's-all-just-be-happy love. The love that Paul is describing is *hard* love. It's durable, sturdy, indifferent love. It's love that *is*. A love that *loves*. A love that persists and pursues, no matter what. "It doesn't matter how good we are, it doesn't matter if we do great things, it doesn't matter if we give our very lives," says Paul, "if we don't love, we're empty."

Let me say that again, It doesn't matter how good and righteous we are, it doesn't matter how many good and righteous things we do, if we don't have love, we are nothing.

That's pretty strong, isn't it? "If I don't have love, I am nobody.... If I don't love, I accomplish nothing."

This love, this gift of love, is what makes it possible for us to live as one body. But Paul is really clear, love is a gift. It isn't something *we* do—it's something that's gifted to us. Love isn't something we can buy or take—it's given to us.

This love is creative and alive. This love is God. God *is* this love. When we pass through the waters of baptism, we are raised up and created as sons and daughters of God. And God has gifted us with love. So we have access to this love—to being inhabited by this love. This love that is patient and kind. This love that is not jealous or in rivalry. This love that doesn't

demand its own way. Love that contains all things, trusts all things, waits expectantly in all things. Love that never ends or stops.

But even as we're being created and formed and transformed by God-who-is-love, we continue to be exposed to the scripts of our old humanity. The tempter makes sure we hear the old scripts, the ones that pull us to impatience, to being unkind, to being in competition, to demanding our way, to giving up. And we forget that *we are alive in the One God, One Spirit, One Christ*. And we slip into thinking that what matters is what *I* do, what *I* accomplish. So instead of giving myself to this gift of love, this gift of God, I give myself to doing good and being good. What I think matters most is that I'm good and that I do the right things.

The story in Luke gives us a good look at what happens to us when we forget that we are God's, when we forget the kind, non-rivalrous, unselfish love that has been gifted to us.

This story begins so well. We heard the first part of it last Sunday, of Jesus in the synagogue, reading the Isaiah scroll: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he sits down and says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And they loved him! And by love, I mean, they *approved*. They *liked* what he said. He made them feel good. He was on *their* side. They started saying to each other, "He's Joseph's son, right?" He was one of them. Their God was his God and he promised them the fulfillment of God's promise. How they loved him! They loved hearing that they were the poor, the oppressed, God's chosen. And finally, they were going to get what belonged to them.

As he's sitting there, Jesus is listening to all this. And finally he responds, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' But he doesn't stop there. His next words cut deep and they push the congregation to the edge. He refuses their jealous and demanding claim to the One God. He interrupts their hope of God's vindication and Jubilee

for themselves by citing Scripture that shows God's Jubilee being visited on *gentiles*, on "the other."

There are those who criticize Jesus, saying that his words aren't patient or kind, that he's deliberately antagonizing them. And certainly that would be one way to see experience the dramatic turn in this story. But I wonder. If we remember that Jesus has just recently returned from the wilderness where he had spent 40 days and 40 nights. And we remember the temptations he said No to. The scripts of the tempter were...and still are... so reasonable. Imagine, afterall, how much *good* Jesus could have done in a political position. We'd love Jesus for president, wouldn't we?! But Jesus said No to that temptation. Jesus also said No to the temptation to turn stones into bread. He could have ended world hunger! But he said No.

Do you hear the temptations to be good? To do good?

In the wilderness, the counterscript of *One*, the counterscript of One Love was being written onto Jesus' body and being. He was well-practiced to identify the tempter's scripts. And that's what he was hearing here in the synagogue. In their words he could hear them placing *their* claims on him—their claims of identity and belonging. But Jesus had already given himself to One God. Jesus has already been claimed by God-who-is-love. So, No, he is *not* Joseph's son—Jesus was conceived by the One Spirit. And No, he doesn't belong to them. The One Spirit has anointed him to bring Good News to the poor, the widow, the stranger...no matter what their ethnicity or religion or any other identity marker. The love that is coursing through Jesus is the love of *one*, the love for one humanity. A love that will always call out the "us vs them" mentality.

Jesus isn't being divisive. He isn't antagonizing them. Nor is he being irritable or resentful. No. What we see here is the love that Paul describes in action. Jesus' love has no

limit. It isn't limited by approval. It isn't limited by being nice. It isn't limited by outcomes and results. The counterscript of love is so deeply written onto Jesus that he's willing to risk approval and status and safety.

It is because Jesus sees the illusions and lies that these *good* people are living with that he decides to speak the truth. Love rejoices in truth. So Jesus speaks the truth of One God, One Spirit, One Christ.

And just like that, their love turns to hate. And they're ready to kill him. These *good*, God-fearing people are ready to *kill Jesus*.

Now, before we shake our heads at them, smugly confident that we never would have done that, I suggest we stop. Let's pause for a moment and consider how much we have in common with Jesus' hometown congregation. They were *good* and *righteous* people with a long history of being God's people. They were comfortable in their goodness, comfortable with their claim on God. So comfortable with the God they knew that they didn't see the danger. They didn't see the danger of their goodness.¹ They didn't see the danger of their comfort. Or the danger of their singular claim on God.

What happened at the synagogue that day keeps happening when the gift of *love* has been forgotten or misplaced or rejected. This is what happens when we trust our goodness instead of trusting God-who-is-love. It's what happens when we trust what we know and understand and what we can do more than when we trust the One Spirit of life and aliveness. *Good* people throughout history have been killing Jesus. It was good, Christian people who landed on the shores of this country and ended up killing nearly all of God's beloved children who were already living here. It was good, Christian people who bought and sold members of the One Body as slaves and who later left Sunday morning worship to watch these same members of the One Body being lynched.

If this is what *good* people are capable of doing, then we, who are good, are capable of the same danger.

The antidote to our dependence on being good is the counterscript of love, God-who-is-love. As this counterscript of love is written onto us, we become more and more practiced in receiving God's love as gift. And our *being* and *living* become dependent on this gift of love. To be sure, this love will lead us to doing good and to being good. But instead of good as the end we're striving for, or good being the outcome, instead, *love* is the end. When love is coursing through our veins, all we are and all we do, is given flesh by love.

Instead of striving to be good and trusting our goodness, may we strive to be inhabited by *love*. By love that is patient and kind. Love that chooses One God, One Spirit, One Christ rather than yielding to the temptations of envy, rivalry, arrogance, domination, resentment, hopelessness.

May the love of *One God, One Spirit, One Christ* be written onto us, inhabit us, and be made flesh in us.

And may we live, as one—as one Body, alive in One God, One Spirit, One Christ.

ⁱ James Alison in a talk at Trinity _____ talks about the dangerousness of the good. That we are addicted to the good.