

God's Tough Love  
Sunday, January 24, In the Year of Our LORD, 2010  
First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Gloversville, New York  
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Jeremiah 1:4-10

1 Corinthians 12:31b, 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-30

A few words before we take a closer look at our reading from the Gospel of Luke ... While the passage from the first chapter of Jeremiah allows a glimpse into Jeremiah's message of judgment and hope, of how God wanted, in essence, to hit a "reset button" by allowing Jerusalem to be destroyed and then rebuilt, this section of verse also reminds us of how often God's prophets demurred. Remember how Moses claimed he was not a great speaker and how Isaiah professed he was not without sin! In this instance, Jeremiah claimed to be too young. To his chagrin, his attempt at bowing out is met with God's insistence. Given the way the people of Jerusalem treated the prophets before him, we can wonder how Jeremiah reacted to God's promise to protect him! In truth, Jeremiah had a pretty rough time at the hands of the ruling elite, but, unlike many of his people, the evidence suggests that when all was said and done, the city destroyed, most of the people dead or in exile, Jeremiah and his scribe, his secretary Baruch, did escape the city alive.

Parenthetically, my enthusiasm for this prophet's work was generated by my Professor of Old Testament at Andover Newton Theological School, Dr. William Holliday, from whom I took a course on Jeremiah. During that semester, he headed the team re-translating Jeremiah for what became the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the translation in our pews. During that academic term, the team was debating parts of the second chapter and we students were privy to some of the points of contention. Dr. Holliday insisted some of Jeremiah's words were a bit cruder than previous translations allowed, but cooler heads prevailed and the language is still pretty tame. If your interest is piqued, go to Jeremiah 2:23-24 and use your imagination!

Not so parenthetically, it was the enthusiasm my professors brought to the study of Scripture that excited me, that turned this twenty-some year old from dreading classes on the Bible to enjoying them. As is true for many students, I fared far better in classes that enthralled me. I was taught to see how ancient words were timeless – and in many instances, timely.

Now, still before we delve into the Gospel Lesson (we *are* getting there) a few words about our reading from Paul's Letter to the people of Corinth. I asked Lyn to re-read the last half of the last verse from Chapter 12 before sharing the familiar 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter for several reasons. First, I wanted us to remember how today's reading is part of a longer letter to a people struggling to get along with each other. While not exactly in the mold of the words of Old Testament prophets, the vast majority of Paul's Letters *were* written to people who either faced specific difficulties or who needed some "tough love" instruction to correct erring ways. The letters to the Corinthians are just such compositions. They are not, "oh, by the way, I have some thoughts I want to share" letters. Their composition usually resulted from an inquiry or a report of less than stellar behavior or the lack of cooperation among a group of people.

One of the complicating factors with the Letters to the Corinthians is that Paul makes reference to a previous letter *to which you and I are not privy*. What we do know is that there were divisions within the Corinth community. The letter starts with some formal niceties and then gets right to the reason for the epistle. To be a bit facetious, four different groups were apparently saying (the words are Paul's, the snobbery tone is mine):

"I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

Can you hear today's version? I'm Methodist. I'm Catholic. I'm Mormon. I'm Lutheran. I'm a Congregationalist. I'm Presbyterian. I'm Unitarian.

To counter that kind of implied "I'm better than you are" talk, Paul wrote this letter. For the last two Sundays, we read from the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter. We read Paul's at times protracted analogy of how, like as with different parts of the human body, the body of the church is comprised of people with different talents, skills, abilities, callings to service. Words from that 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter comprise much of the litany of Installation of Church Officers in which we as a congregation will participate later in today's service of worship.

It is after this lecture on how people could cooperate better if they recognized that some people are better at one type of Christian service and others have a proclivity in another area of our faith lives that Paul concludes with some favorite words of Scripture. Remember that the assignment of chapters and verses in the Bible came *long* after words in the Bible were first composed. This is an instance when the fuller meaning of a passage is lost if we think the first verse of a new chapter is a starting point. Catch the significance of how Lyn read this passage. Adding the last half of the last verse of the preceding chapter, we hear it this way:

And I will show you a still more excellent way: ... 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, ...

I assure you that I find much of this passage appealing, but I have three misgivings. The first is how rarely it is read in the context of the chapter that comes before, perhaps because few realize how entwined the words are. My second "misgiving" is one of disappointment – that when we get to the fourth verse and Paul starts to define this ideal of love, he starts with "Love is patient, kind, not envious or ..." I wince at that because of how I "get it wrong" from the get-go. I know I am not particularly patient, though wording it like that lays claim to some improvement, as I believe that although my patience is wanting, I at least have a modicum of that virtue. It might only be a 3 on a scale of 1 to 10, but I think there were times earlier in my life when a decimal point might have come before the digit!

No we come to the point! God's tough love suggests a hard enough look at ourselves, at what makes us tick, the degree to which we exemplify God's ways of love and reconciliation – a hard enough look that we will do more than just "wince" as I do when I read of love as patient – that we come to terms with the need to change our ways that we might be the people God wants us to be. God's love is not as "free" as some suggest or want. It comes with expectations and with more than an occasional admonition!

Hopefully, God's contemporary message of God's love for us is not as it was in Jeremiah's time when God decided to punish the chosen people with the destruction of their beloved city and decades of exile in a foreign land. But God's tough love, as expressed by Jesus on that day in Nazareth is perhaps nearly as disturbing. To the casual reader, the passage might be confusing. What was it exactly that Jesus said that made his townsfolk so mad as to even think of throwing him off a cliff? In parallel to how the Chosen People continually rejected the words of God's prophets whose lives – and words – are recorded in the Old Testament, what less than pleasant import did these words about a widow of Zarephath in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian impart?

For today's message we need only realize that Elijah's ministry to widow in Sidon and Elisha's healing of Naaman's leprosy carried significance because the persons impacted were *not* Jewish. Ministry to them stood as constant reminders to the Chosen People that God is the God of *all* people and ... *here is the rub* ... God's love is such that if the Creator's "chosen" don't deserve its embrace, if they don't behave as they ought, *God will bestow love on others*. The people of Nazareth "got it." Jesus' message of God's tough love was intended for more attentive ears than theirs. That rebuke did not sit well at all!

Pointing fingers is always dangerous, because accusations of hypocrisy might come back to haunt the one doing the pointing, but ... to go ahead and point some fingers ... the arrogance with which some Christian leaders "preach" their straight and narrow message is so off-putting! Our frustration with those who claim to know all of God's truths when we, a bit more humbly, claim to *pursue* God's truth is a subject we have discussed before. Here's a hint. Any time someone starts with "God told me that ...," one might be more than a little skeptical. I realize that is how people reacted to Old Testament prophets, but more often than not, what follows contemporary "God told me that ...," lines is less than loving, less than inclusive, less than holistic, and far less than reconciling. Most "God told me that ..." lines are accompanied by nationalistic, me-first, we are the new Chosen People statements that make me embarrassed to have my title "The Rev." connected to my name lest people assume I am as short-sighted and as narrow minded as those I criticize. I know ... those words are hardly admirable. I should instead answer those messages with our claim that God loves all peoples, that no denomination has a monopoly on truth, and that there is another message about God's love "out there" which needs to be heard.

When The Rev. Pat Robertson claimed the people of Haiti brought this earthquake on themselves because of a deal their ancestors supposedly made with the devil more than two hundred years ago in order to be freed from slavery and when John Travolta flew Scientology ministers to Haiti so that they could heal people simply by touching them, I was left wondering how much more "bad press" religion needs? Yes, the 700 Club has raised money for relief in Haiti and yes, Mr. Travolta took surgeons, plastic surgeons, trauma specialists, cardiologists and medical supplies as well. But, I find it interesting (and I am not being facetious) is why and how no one has asked what I think a logical question: if Mr. Travolta believes his ministers can heal by simply touching people, why does he need to supply "surgeons, plastic surgeons, trauma specialists, and cardiologists?" ...

That The Rev. Robertson and John Travolta are so sure of themselves stands as a warning to *any* of us who claim to know the essential truths of life – or of our God. God's tough love requires constant self-examination, an unending process of questioning human assumptions, of taking a proverbial step back and taking a hard look at oneself, ones nation, ones role in the grand scheme

of all of human life of which each of us is but a small part. To immediately take umbrage at criticism is to reject an opportunity to grow. Coming to terms with how critique can be a chance to broaden ones perspective is something we should embrace, not reject. To “shoot the messenger,” to stubbornly refuse to hear words of tough love – be they from family, friends – or of God – is to react as did people to the words of Jeremiah more than twenty-five hundred years ago and is to react as did the people of Nazareth when Jesus shared some hard truths with the people of His hometown.

God’s truths are ever unfolding! God’s incredible love for us – for all people – a love that is nonetheless accompanied with admonitions and calls to faithfulness – is one we will ever struggle to fully understand and comprehend. But the first step is to be open to hear and embrace the tough love of our God, lest in our pride, our self-assurance, our insistence that *we* “have it right” and need no more instruction, we merit the same criticism I have leveled at others in today’s message.

The bottom line? The final word is that until we truly embrace the ways of God’s love as shared in that 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, we will have to fall back on the more practical methods of cooperation as discussed in Chapter 12. And ... that “lost” last half verse of the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter which should always be read with the 13<sup>th</sup>, is so telling, for it reminds us that there is ever:

a still more excellent way.

Amen.