

Jeremiah 1:4-10

1:4 Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

1:5 "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."

1:6 Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

1:7 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,

1:8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

1:9 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.

1:10 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."

1 Corinthians 12:31

But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

13:1 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.

13:2 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.

13:3 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.

13:4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant

13:5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

13:6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

13:7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

13:8 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.

13:9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;

13:10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

13:11 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.

13:12 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.

13:13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love

Proclamation of the Word

Do you remember your first love?

Mine was Rusty. We met in Preschool and were friends all through elementary school. I had four older brothers. I knew the way you loved someone was to play together. At Mrs. Lowman's daycare where we both went after 1/2 day kindergarten, we climbed trees and kissed behind the house. Just once. It was icky. We threw the football, played freeze tag, and laughed a lot. In elementary school Rusty and I wrestled on the playground at recess for fun. I know. How romantic. When cleaning out my mother's house after she died, I found board game box tops where I had written "Laura loves Rusty" "Rusty loves Laura" from when I was first learning to write. I wrote that on everything. He was really my best friend.

Do you remember your first love?

As we grow up our relationships change. Our childlike understanding of love changes, too. The older I become the more I realize that our true first love is God. God is the one who first loves us like no one ever will. And our relationships founded on God's love are the richest and most meaningful. God gives us the church, the body of Christ, in which to grow up in faith.

Paul is writing a love letter of sorts to the church at Corinth. Church, like any related human group, has its challenges and blessings. Let's be honest. The church there had its challenges as Kelly told us last week when preaching on chapter 12. The more well-to-do and more gifted saw themselves as deserving more honor, eating first at the Lord's supper for instance as society expected. Paul was reminding them that the lowest person deserves the same honor. The Jew and the Greek, the slave and free- these were the Corinthians divisions, divisions of class, economics, and ethnicity. Paul reminds us that all are one in Christ Jesus. He describes the Body of Christ where every member matters and has a role to play, something to contribute to "build up," always to build up the body of Christ, the church. Each member is needed, valued, and has something to contribute. Paul is writing about how we live in Christian community. I want to linger at verse 11.

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.

To grow in God's love is to mature into Christ. God wants us to grow up into the full stature of Christ! When we know that God is our first love, our lives reflect that love to others. You may be thinking, didn't Jesus say "come as a child" and welcome children? Of course, but children are meant to grow. That is their job. There is a big difference between being *child-ish* and *child-like*. God desires grown-ups who love. I have known 16 year-olds who are as mature as some sixty year olds. Chronological age has little to do with maturity. Some grow older without growing up. In a culture enamored with youth

and being perpetual adolescents, we are called to be grown-ups. Someone commented to me this week, "It seems the kids are in charge. Where are the grown-ups?"

Paul writes, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child." First, think about how children speak. One of the first words we learn is "mine." They begin to know that they are separate selves. They find a toy and want it all to themselves. Another child reaches for the toy and the other shouts "Mine, mine, mine!" In Christian community, there is no such thing as "mine." There is only "gift." All good gifts come from God and are meant to be shared, to build up the body, the people.

We sing the old hymn,

*We give Thee but Thine own,
Whate'er the gift may be;
All that we have is Thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from Thee.*

There is only gift. Not mine, but Thine. Even our lives belong to God. We are Thine own. The grown up Christian knows that every heartbeat, every moment is a pure gift. What do we have that is not a gift? Through faith, even my sins are not mine, but can be cast upon God, wiped clean.

Love is not selfish then. In fact Paul insists here and elsewhere that Love always seeks the needs of others and not one's own.ⁱ The paradox is this- while seeking what is best for others, we receive well-being. What goes around comes around.

Next Paul writes, "When I was a child... I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child."

Actually, "understood like a child" is a better translation than "thought like a child." Thinking leads to understanding. Knowledge is useless without understanding. For the Corinthians nothing was more valued than knowledge. We live in a college town where knowledge is most highly valued. You and I may know smart people who have knowledge, but very little understanding. Understanding listens. Understanding requires listening not just with the head, but with the heart. That kind of listening is rare, a gift.

Grown up Christians listen and discern with the help of the Holy Spirit. We deliberate in community in order to understand God's purposes. We can read the Bible personally, but we understand the Bible when we learn from one another, the tradition, scholarship, and always with a heart for love. I know folks who wield scripture like a sword. They may know verses to launch into a situation like a grenade, but they may not be doing that out of love. And usually, they are not willing to listen. Rather they want to be right. Children do this. When they are right, they know they are right. For the immature, being right is more important than listening in love. As a writer from the Taize community reflectsⁱⁱ,

It is not enough to stick to principles or to know who was wrong and who was right on a divisive issue. When it comes to life in the Church, those who love will find the right answers, correct behavior and actions which best correspond to what can help a community to grow. Contrary perhaps to the Corinthians, Paul does not forget that we are still on the road, that we go forward as best we can. Fortunately for all of us "love is patient."

Understanding and listening takes courage. It takes courage to admit we were wrong or missed the mark or did not understand fully. It also takes courage to accept an apology, to forgive, and to move on.

Grown-ups listen in order to understand. Grown-ups hear with the heart and with the inward groanings of the Spirit. Having knowledge without love is meaningless. Grown-ups listen in order to understand.

We spend our lives growing up. Becoming Christian is also a life-long process. God loves us through our awkward years. God is never done with us, even in the late years of life. And we cling to that promise found in Philippians, "God who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it." I recently visited with a member who has moved to assisted living. What a huge and difficult change that is for her. But with joy she declared, "God isn't finished with me. I have a ministry in this place. I have gifts to offer." Indeed. Amen! Praise God.

Speaking and thinking determine our actions. Psychologists tell us that there is a link between thought, speech, and behavior. They are intertwined. Speech affects thought and vice-versa. They both affect behaviors and action. Paul is ultimately telling us that love is a way of living, of behaving.

French philosophers have written, "There is no love, only proof of love." The proof of love is action: patience, kindness, NOT arrogance, rudeness, irritability, insisting on one's own way...Love is how we treat one another. The philosopher got one part wrong though. There is love. God is love.

Consider our first true love, God. God created the earth, playfully flinging the colors of the sun across the palette of blue skies, molding and making critters and creatures of all kinds, beautiful and terrifying, and even shaped and sculpted human beings out of the earth's clay. God spoke "Let there be," worked, created, and then spoke "That's good" declaring only blessing with words. God used speech sparingly, but for blessing. God acts in generous love.

Jesus, too, made in the image of the Father, did the same. If you ever read letter Bible that has the words of Jesus in red, notice how little is in red. Jesus acted more than he spoke. He demonstrated love, more than he said "I love you." He showed us love in his life, ministry, and final work of redemption- not returning violence with violence, but only love.

I have several callings as you do. One of my greatest callings has been to raise children. It is also sometimes the most challenging. We parents, uncles, aunts, teachers, church members try to model to the best of our abilities for our children. We try to live by example because children learn what they live.

There is a new song out by Tim McGraw written with his daughter in mind as she goes off to college. I do not know much about country music, but it can be packed with theology- some good, some bad. The video and song, "Be humble and kind" sums up McGraw's advice to his daughter. It is her charge, her benediction. The video has beautiful images of all God's people throughout the world, all races, faiths, abilities, and shapes. You can see it on our church Facebook page.

He sings lines like these:

*When the dreams you're dreamin' come to you
When the work you put in is realized
Let yourself feel the pride but
Always stay humble and kind*

*Don't take for granted the love this life gives you
When you get where you're goin
Don't forget turn back around
And help the next one in line
Always stay humble and kind*

Sounds a lot like Micah 6:8, "God has shown us what is good and what is required: to seek justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God." Like a song that gets stuck in your head, may Paul's charge and benediction to LOVE ring in your ears and play in your mind throughout this week. Let it be a song that shapes your life.

It starts with remembering your first love, God, and responding by living the more excellent way.

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ⁱ *New Interpreters Bible Volume X* (Abingdon: Nashville, 2002) p.952. The prologue has two convictions (13:1-3) 1. Love's nature is not to seek one's own needs but the needs of others 2. In so doing love ultimately secures not only the other person but also one's self. Found elsewhere (1 Cor. 10:24, 33, Phil. 2:1-4, Rom 13:8, 15:1-2)

ⁱⁱ http://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2015-04-01