

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for January 31, 2016 ~ Epiphany 4C
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The season after The Epiphany of Our Lord is one in which we consider our own calling against the backdrop of the call of those who have gone before us. God's call is accompanied by gifts that will be needed in order to be who we are called to be and to do what we are called to do. The life of those who are called is to be lived out in the company of others who also are called. Sometimes, as in the case of Jeremiah, Jesus, and St. Paul, the call is to deliver a message. And, sometimes, that message is one that people would rather not hear.

You would think that a message of love would be one that everybody wants to hear, wouldn't you? Think of how we like to exalt love. We like to talk about it and sing about it. Of all the things God might want us to tell others about and of all the things we might want to hear about, talk of love seems like the kind of message that ought to be universally welcomed.

However, as we can see from the examples of Jeremiah, Jesus, and St. Paul in today's readings, you can get run out of town pretty fast for too much talk about love – love divine.

The Corinthians, to whom St. Paul addressed two lengthy letters, were excessively impressed with the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit. The expression of those gifts was causing some tension among them. In the 13th chapter of his first letter to them, St. Paul says that the greatest gift of all and the one gift without which all the rest are clanging gongs and tinkling cymbals is the gift of love – love divine. He says that this kind of love is the surest sign of the work of God's Spirit among God's people. It is a special kind of love – a self-giving, other-affirming, honest, just, authentic love. Unless our religious gifts, our alms, our knowledge, our good works, and all the rest are exercised in love, they have no real lasting value and might as well be counted as nothing. This kind of love is not sentimentality, not romance, not emotion, and not easy. It is grounded in a decision and its consistent expression is an act of the will. It is the love by which and for which God created the universe and the love that will, in the end, be victorious. It is tough and it is authentic.

Many of us are in love with the idea of love. People say, "I love St. John's Church." Sadly, all too often, what they really mean is that they are in love with the *idea* of St. John's Church. People say, "I love my neighbor." But then, in an instant, they reveal that they really don't when the next sentence begins with the word, **BUT**.

We also have before us today the story of Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth, his home church, so to speak. In this experience we see the love of God incarnate, God's love manifested in Jesus Christ. We see from the risks he was willing to take that this love is stronger than death. And, we also see that this love does not always say the things people want to hear. This kind of love always tells the truth. There are things about our salvation and about the redemption of creation that require that our stubbornness and our darkness be revealed to us.

Shortly after the release of the book *The Castle in the Forest*, I heard an interview with the author, Norman Mailer, on NPR. He described the book as about the intersection of good and evil, heaven and

hell, an inferno of elements. The narrator in *The Castle in the Forest* is a devil, posing as one of Hitler's SS intelligence officers. He writes years later about how he guided the early life of Adolph Hitler. The narrator rarely meets a boundary he doesn't break. In the interview, Mailer spoke about his long-held belief that the best human possibilities lie close to the worst. That, really is the topic he wants to explore in this novel. And, it is the topic most of us deal with in our day-to-day life. The best within us lies so very close to the worst, doesn't it? That's what often makes it so hard for us to determine what to do and so hard to choose to do the right thing.

The witness of Jeremiah was to call forth the best from God's people by reminding them of God's covenant love. His message met with a great deal of rejection. The witness of Jesus and of St. Paul was the same. It is a love that pours itself out for the other, the beloved, without regard for a return on the investment. It feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, shelters the homeless, forgives the offender, and enables us to live with ourselves and others. It is willing to risk an entire relationship if that is what is necessary to tell the truth. And, the first step toward giving this sort of love, love divine, is to experience it for ourselves. To be brought face-to-face with the best and the worst that is in us in the presence of the Lover of our Souls.

We may miss the point because we are so self-absorbed. There is a reservoir of love already standing within us. Like the subject of a song about love that was popular years ago, we are "looking for love in all the wrong places."

When we come to the time in our lives where we do see ourselves as we really are, a mixture of beauty and beast, our only salvation is in the realization that **God, too, sees both sides of our nature and loves them both**. God seeks the transformation of the lower, darker side and the exaltation and maturity of the other. God's love for us is tough, authentic, just, and unquenchable!

The ultimate expression of God's universal love is God's own sacrifice on the cross in the flesh. The ongoing expression of God's desire to love us is in this banquet, given so that we never forget to remember. And it is the communion of those who are willing to be open to the giving and receiving of that divine, unconditional, inexhaustible love. Love Divine, in spirit and in truth, in word and deed, is God's message to us and our message to the world at our doorstep.