

The Gift that Keeps on Giving

Jeremiah 1:4-10

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-30

Once upon a time,
In a land far away,
A beautiful, independent,
self assured Princess,
happened upon a frog as she sat
contemplating ecological issues
on the shore of an unpolluted pond
in a verdant meadow near her castle.
The frog hopped into the Princess' lap
and said: Elegant Lady,
I was once a handsome Prince,
until an evil witch cast a spell upon me.
One kiss from you, however,
and I will turn back
into the dapper, young Prince that I am
and then, my sweet, we can marry
and setup housekeeping in yon castle
with my Mother,
where you can prepare my meals,
clean my clothes, bear my children,
and forever feel grateful and happy doing so.
That night,
while dining on lightly sautéed frog legs
seasoned in a white wine and onion cream sauce,
she chuckled to herself and thought:
“ I don't think so.”

When I first read that little story, it simply made me smile. But after meeting with my two colleagues from the Hope Community group, it struck me that we are all a little like that frog prince. Sometimes we say the most outrageous things, which reflect how we see the world, without regard for how it might appear to others. As we

engage in our conversations, there is, at least initially, a tendency to be a little myopic, to only see what we want and how things directly affect us. As in our story, it's very easy to see and recognise it when it is being done by someone else. It's a little more challenging to name it when we are the ones who are guilty.

The group has come to the consensus that there will be 2 sites, meaning that worship will be held at two sites each Sunday. That makes sense, at least initially, and it's easy to talk about until we reach the point of naming which two of the four choices of churches we will choose. If, as is presently thought, the eastern site is Lincoln Road, then we have no problem If it is not, then we will be challenged to see beyond our comfortable perspective. And it is only when we attempt to grapple with NOT having weekly services here, that we begin to understand the apparent short-sightedness of others.

And so we come to Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, and the challenge that lies there. The passage which we read this morning is very popular at weddings, which is a good thing, but is not what Paul originally had in mind.

Paul is dealing with a very unruly congregation. Some scholars think that what we have as two letters is actually composed of parts of four letters that he wrote to this church, which suggests that he really did have his challenges with them! His letters are addressing the fact that this congregation really doesn't grasp how life reflects the Christian values.

The people at Corinth had strange views about marriage and sexuality – on the one hand they denied both, and then on the other some persisted in immoral conduct. They also hadn't let go of class

differences, so when they gathered for the Lord's supper, those who had plenty to eat overindulged but did nothing to share with those who had nothing.

They valued spiritual gifts – speaking in tongues, the gift of prophecy, the performing of miracles – but they set up a hierarchy of their value, so that the flashy ones were valued more highly than the more modest or less colourful ones. Some who deemed themselves more spiritual decided that they had no responsibility to those they deemed were less so, and so they participated in pagan feasts because they knew they couldn't hurt them, causing distress and a crisis of faith for those who were less certain in their faith.

It is to these people that Paul addresses the remarks that we read last week about the body, and how we are all part of the one body. But at the end of that, he tells them: "And I will show you a still more excellent way."

His more excellent way follows on his words which remind the Corinthians that all spiritual gifts are given by God for the good of all, that the body is designed to be strengthened by the gifts, not weakened or divided by them.

Paul tells us, in this passage, that the greatest spiritual gifts, the greatest gifts of faith, are useless if their use is not motivated and guided by love. And Paul is talking about the gritty kind of love, not the hearts, flowers and chocolates kind.

The love to which Paul refers is love that is expressed in practical, visible ways. It's the kind of commitment that deems no sacrifice too great when it is made out of love. It challenges us to do our best, to be the best that we can be, to give the best that we can,

all for the good of others.

It reminds us that our Creator doesn't stint with generosity, forgiveness, understanding, compassion, and love, and asks only for love in return.

It's a model, indeed, for marriage, but also for parents, for friends, for congregations, and perhaps especially for congregations involved in the kind of talks that we are. It's a love which prompts patience and kindness even when we are tired, short-tempered, and distracted. It's a love which prompts us to seek to understand the fears, disappointment and dismay that others may be experiencing as they grapple, for perhaps the first time, the realities that lie before them, that lie before us all.

Paul reminds us of this love, of the love that God offers, a love which comforts us when we are most fretful, or frightened, which warms us and encourages us, even as it challenges us to rise above our pettiness and short-sightedness, and to offer that same love to others.

It is our assurance of that love that sustains us. It is that love which challenges us when we risk becoming too narrow, or too frightened, or too secure, or too hard-hearted, or too rigid. For we are called to ministries of love, even in the toughest of times.

And so, what could be more appropriate as we move forward in our conversations with others, and in exploring our future, than to pause and reflect upon this song of love, which invites us to renew our commitment to truly seek to live as witnesses to the greatest gift our God has given, a gift which continues to give: the gift of love, love for God, love for one another, and love for our greater community? For

even as we look to our own future, we also look to see how the world is helping Haiti to move forward as well, reflecting a tough, gritty and determined love humanity, that surely must warm our Creator's heart.

Truly Christian love does not make demands of others, but seeks to understand and to be compassionate, and gives freely of oneself. And so we are invited to live in that spirit, motivated by love, knowing that we have nothing to fear, for our vision extends beyond ourselves – even on the days when we feel, or sound, like frogs. Thanks be to God! Amen.