

The Fourth Week after the Epiphany.

January 30, 2022

Annual Meeting Sunday

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalms 71:1-6

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-30

The Family Table

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA.*



The writer Nora Ephron once described family as “a group of people who eat the same thing for dinner.” Her simple statement implies... not necessarily blood ties, or like-mindedness, or even civility. But it could. The make-up of the group gathered around a table... to share family meals... will change over time as new faces appear and beloved faces fade into memory. The gathered will move through their respective stages of life... as babies are born and learn to walk, and run, and are soon donning a cap and gown, at some point leaving the nest, reconfiguring their lives, leaving town, returning to the table, moving into their adulthood and finally leaving the earth-bound table to move onto the heavenly banquet. If we use Nora Ephron’s definition of family as “a group of people who eat the same thing for dinner,” we can most certainly say that church is family, a group that gathers together to share stories and meals, and to share the work of clearing the table, of doing the dishes, and of planning the next gathering. Church is a family of the beloved who do not claim a common last name, but rather a shared identity through the waters of baptism. We extend hospitality and welcome new members into the Body of Christ, a family that returns again, and again, to be fed at sacred table, sharing the holy food and drink of our common life.

In her book *Searching for Sunday*, the late Rachel Held Evans wrote that the church is “God saying, I’m throwing a banquet and all these mismatched, messed-up people are invited. Here, have some wine.”¹ And so it is.... When we think back to the early church, we must remember that they were budding communities, groups of individuals and blood relatives who brought their gifts... and their foibles... to the challenge of being a family of faith. These early Christian communities were navigating an uncharted course as they lived into their new identities as of followers of Jesus. They were not yet known as Christians, but rather as a people of “The Way,” an open-air term not associated with walls, steeples, or stained glass. “The Way of Jesus” is inherently dynamic. The early church was on a journey that promised blessings and challenges in this life that culminated in heavenly glory beyond this earthly sojourn. There was no “how to” manual or recipe for being “church.” Church in the first century was a Jesus movement composed of small clusters of the faithful who gathered to worship in homes where bread was broken, and wine was shared following instructions that Jesus gave at the Last Supper. This budding group of Jesus followers was the church in its infancy... with much growth and change to come in the centuries and millenia that lay ahead. In fact, the early church family could hardly have envisioned the forms that church would take as it grew and changed over time. Church buildings,

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, pg. 153.

basilicas, and cathedrals became the center of church life. Spires would reach heavenward as the institution would, at times, become weighted down with jewel encrusted finery and restrictive legalism. And then the church changed some more. We are members of a large and diverse family that shares the identity of being baptized in Christ, a family that has known two-thousand years of building, of being challenged, of being stuck, of reforming, and of being challenged yet again. And here we are... together in this place... on this day... followers of Jesus on a journey together... a journey that does not promise to be easy, but one that promises abundant life.

As with families of any time or place, the nascent church knew challenges, disputes, missteps, and personality clashes. They were groupings of fallible human beings who at times succeeded, and at other times, failed miserably. The early church had Paul as their pastor. Paul's dramatic encounter with the risen Christ on the Road to Damascus changed him, the course of his life, and the direction of Christianity. Paul's conversion experience helped the message, of the Good News in Christ, spread beyond the Jewish world out into the larger world. When we read Paul's letters in our time, we must remember the context of the early church in which they were written. Paul's core message, however, is consistent over time. As the beloved, we are called to live in the light of God's transforming love, known in relationship with the living Christ... a relationship that invites us to continue to grow in that love and in deepening relationship with one another. Paul's message is that, in Christ, God's love is boundless and lifegiving... and that the community that gathers in Christ's name is to stay focused on that love.

Today we are considering the 13th chapter of Paul's first letter to the congregation at Corinth. Of course, when Paul wrote his epistles, he did not divide his letters up into chapters. That was done centuries later. This 13th chapter, known as the "love chapter," is located in the middle of the letter. First Corinthians 13 is often read at weddings. If one hears this passage, without considering the rest of the letter, it can sound merely like a sweet and lovely prescription for Christian love:

(read sweetly)

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

First Corinthians 13 was not, however, meant to offer sweet encouragement. Paul was writing to a congregation in conflict. He was offering his pastoral observations and advice to a troubled and quarreling community. In his letter, Paul names problems that he has heard about, and offers direction about how the community might move through their conflicts. When he sat down to write the letter, Paul was most likely in the midst of a three-year stay in the town of Ephesus on the coast of Turkey... about 180 miles from Corinth. Biblical scholars believe that Paul wrote the letter between the year 53 and 57. Over two decades had passed since Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul would have been sitting at a desk using a reed pen with a bronze stylus. I can envision him in a very thoughtful posture as he repeatedly dipped his pen into ink, writing on paper made from papyrus reeds that had been pounded and pressed into sheets of paper. Paul would pause between sentences to gather his thoughts as he held the struggling congregation close, hoping to send a message that would touch their hearts, remind them of their reason for being, and set them on a better course. Paul was using the inherently limited tool of language to impart a message that is beyond words. He had spent 18 months with the small congregation at Corinth. The reports that he had heard from Chloe's people were weighing heavily on

Paul as he put pen to paper. Maybe Paul meant to impart a more emphatic tone as he tries to get his message across:

(read more sternly)

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

Some have said that, in our time, the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians has been domesticated right out of its context. Whether heard sweetly or sternly, the message about the transforming power of love continues to speak to our condition as a church... as a community... as a family of faith that gathers together... at Christ's table.

Later today, we will gather for our Annual Meeting to attend to the business of this parish. Every year, we, as a parish know blessings as we work through the challenges that come our way. In this second year of pandemic, the same holds true. The challenges have been different, but they have also offered us new opportunities to reflect and to discern, together, the future into which God is calling us. We have been stirred awake. The disruption of the pandemic has offered fresh perspectives as we consider what it means to be a people of Christ in this place, in this new moment. We are invited to renew our commitment to be bearers of Christ's love in a changing world that continues to be hungry for hope and meaning. Whether in-person, or virtually, we continue to gather at Christ's table, we continue to pass the metaphorical kleenex, to pray our laments, to share our life stories and milestones, and to offer our gratitude for God's abiding presence with us. We continue to bring our blessedly imperfect selves to the table to share in this great enterprise of faith known as "church," as a people of St. Paul's.

The 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians never suggests that love is about a "feel good" emotion. The community we share is a living, textured tapestry of life stories, woven together in God's core message of love, a divine embrace that strengthens us through life's rough patches. That love is meant to strengthen us to stay at the table when the going gets rough or when our passions feel deflated. Christ is forever inviting us into a deeper life of communion, as a community whose identity is not bound up in a building, but rather in the relationships that bind us... one to another... in Christ. God's love continues to call forth that which is fresh, alive, reconciling, and ever-redeeming.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of the sacred message that is written... not in words... but in community. In the third chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes:

You yourselves are our letter written on our hearts, to be known and read by all and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living god, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.
(2 Corinthians 3:2-3)

Brené Brown, the Episcopalian sociologist and researcher on the topic of vulnerability has said:

“I went to church thinking that it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away... but the church isn’t an epidural; its like a midwife. I thought faith would say, ‘I’ll take away the pain and discomfort,’ but what it ended up saying was, ‘I’ll sit with you.’”²

The gift and the challenge of being family is that we bring all of who we are, in all of our blessed flaws and vulnerability... to sit with one another in our pain... as we seek to move through our struggles... as we celebrate milestones and accomplishments...and as we give back to God, and to one another, in thanksgiving. May we continue onward as a people whose faith language is love and service... witnessing to Christ with the whole of our lives, a people of St. Paul’s who belongs to the eternal family of witnesses that spans the generations, a family that through these past two millenia continues to gather around Christ’s table to share a feast of simple food, a common meal to which we are called...

....because we belong to Christ

....and to one another...

Amen...

² Evans quoting Brown, *Searching for Sunday*, pg 209.