

## Sermon on Epiphany 4, January 30, 2022

As you know, Charles and I lived in Lockeport for 7 years. We really enjoyed our time there. It was a great place to live. While we were there, we noticed a few things. A lot of the men were lobster fishermen and some of them did very well for themselves. But they were still driving old beat up trucks and still living in the same small houses they'd lived in when they started. Charles asked one of them about it once and he said that if he started flaunting his money around, he'd soon be ostracized.

They especially hated it when people left and came back acting as if they were now better than their old neighbours, getting above themselves. And they made it pretty clear by taking them down a peg or two whenever they could. Recalling old incidents from their childhood. Insisting on using childhood nicknames. Everyone had one. Like Captain Crunch, who, when he was a teenager, I think, had rammed his boat into the dock. When I knew him, in his 40s, he was a well-respected lobsterman who handled his boat well. He was still known as Crunch. I forget his real name. In Lockeport, he will always be Crunch.

Well, Lockeport was much like Nazareth in many ways. A very small town on the edge of nowhere. In Lockeport's case, an outport on the coast. In Nazareth's, on the very edge of the plateau of Galilee, looking down a high cliff at Samaria. And Nazareth, I think, had similar attitudes. Certainly, when this carpenter's son comes back, they're a bit skeptical. It's hard to tell their attitude from this story. Perhaps their minds were a bit open. But in the end, the group mind decided this wannabe Messiah was way too big for his britches and they try to push him off the cliff.

I can well imagine the neighbours and relatives saying, "Well, he sounds OK now. All these rumours we hear about him, maybe there's something to them. But it's hard to believe. After all, we changed his diapers. We remember him when he was a grubby little boy playing in the dirt with all the other grubby little boys. Do you remember the time we went to Jerusalem for Passover and he stayed behind and his parents had to go back looking for him and it took them 3 days to find him. Hmmp. And now he thinks he's some big shot Messiah?"

Of course, Jesus didn't make it any easier for himself. He throws their doubts about him into the faces. He reminds them of all the prophets in the past who were rejected by their own people and sent off to foreigners. It's kind of weird that he talked to them this way. I'm not sure why he did, unless he already knew perfectly well that they wouldn't accept him. Or maybe he thought he knew and overreacted a bit. Hard to say from this short piece.

Well, what can we take from this story? The first thing I thought of was that all of us sometimes have a hard time with our families and neighbours. Have you experienced this? Family members who think they know you, because they did know you pretty well when you were a child, and they don't give you enough credit for the growth and learning you've done since then. Or they won't let you forget your youthful foolishness. Which we all had a lot of. But our families will rub our noses in them if they think we're getting uppity.

Well, if you find your family has typecast you and isn't letting you grow or change or be the new you, isn't giving you credit for your wisdom and experience and the things you know and have learned over the years, take heart. You are in good company. Jesus had the same problems. His own family thought he needed keeping under control because he was getting out of hand. His neighbours found him so annoying they tried to kill him. He knows what it's like to have your nearest and dearest rejecting you. It's still hard to bear, but it's not just you. It's a thing a lot of people have experienced. Humanity's way of keeping people in their place. But, like Jesus, you don't have to stay in your place. You have options.

A second thing we might take from this is to ask ourselves if we do this to others? Do we think we know people so well that we can't see the changes in them? The growth in them? Do we think that because we've known someone for 70 years we have some kind of right to say who they are and to try to make them stay the same way they have always been? Not consciously, I'm sure. But most groups of people do this. Does our church do this? Maybe reject the ministry of someone because 20 years ago they did this or that? Maybe remember when they didn't speak up much and so disregard what they say now they have more confidence or encouragement? It's worth thinking about. Are we accepting people for who they are now? Or are we still seeing them the way they were when we first met them?

And the third thing that occurred to me popped into my head reading the Jeremiah reading today. God calls Jeremiah to be his prophet. And Jeremiah says, "I can't do that. I'm only a boy." How many times have we ourselves been told, "You can't do that. You're only .... Only a boy. Only a girl. Only ...whatever." How many times have we told ourselves these things? Maybe as a kid our parents told us we were stupid, possibly when we were doing something foolish. But that stuck with us and now we feel stupid. Every time we make a mistake, we say it to ourselves again. Or they told us we were not good at math. Or we couldn't sing. Or whatever. And we accepted that judgement and still believe it today. And repeat it to ourselves. When we do that, we are acting like that crowd.

It's good for us to remember that often our parents said these things in a fit of anger when we'd done something foolish, as children do. It might not have been their considered opinion. It's also important to remember that they might have been wrong. And that our parents may have been too tired and too busy to actually see into our depths even then. And also that, in the last 60 years or so, we might possibly have learned a few things. And that it is possible for us to learn and grow and change and develop.

Take note that God called Jeremiah and didn't take his excuse for an answer. He says, "Don't say you're only a boy. You're going to be a great prophet." And he called Jesus even though he was from a small town. Jesus really was the Messiah. That was a possibility his neighbours didn't seem to consider when they thought he was getting all uppity. It's a possibility the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees didn't seem to consider when they were trying to get rid of him. It's a possibility we should consider when we think God might be calling us. Maybe God knows something about us that we don't know, and our family and neighbours didn't know either. Maybe we aren't stupid or whatever after all. Maybe we can actually take on this new role God is calling us to, and do a good job of it.

It is God who sees each person's heart and soul. It is God who created us, formed us in the womb as Psalm 139 says, and knit together our inmost being. God knows us better than our neighbours, our family, our parents. God knows us better than we know ourselves. And God sees the potential in us and seeks to draw it out all our lives. And, don't forget, God loves us very much, treasures us, values us, just as we are.

And that brings me to St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, our epistle for today. If you recall, Paul has been listing gifts and talking about how we all are needed for the Body of Christ to function and saying which gifts are most important. And today he says, "Forget all that. I'll show you a much better way." And we have this beautiful chapter on love, which is so often read at weddings. I also read it a lot at funerals, because it sums up a person's life.

Paul says, it doesn't matter if I can speak every language in the world, and even the language of the angels, if I don't have love, I'm not worth listening to. It doesn't matter if I have 10 PhDs and am consulted by every world government and my name is known in every household, if I don't have love, it's not worth a thing. It doesn't matter if I have enough faith to move a mountain or if I give away all I have to the poor or even if I am burned as a martyr, if I don't have love, it doesn't get me anywhere.

We need love, St. Paul says. Love is the key to everything. Love is what will get us through everything. All the other things will fade out in time. You'll forget those languages and your skills will become outdated. Your achievements will be forgotten. All those things will fall short. They will all pass away. The only things that will last are faith, hope and love, and love is the most important.

Isn't that true? Isn't that what gets us through the messes of life, the hardships of life? What makes our victories so sweet? Isn't that what makes a relationship work? Doesn't it cover a multitude of sins and mistakes? In this time of pandemic, when we are all stretched to the max, these are the three things that will get us through, that have been getting us through. Our faith in God and each other. Our hope, that bright light that keeps us from giving up. And love. Love of God, God's love for us, and our love for each other. Isn't that what's been getting us through all this time?

Love is at the core. Because God is love and we are made in God's image, so we are made for love and to love. Love is at the core of who we are. And if we can apply that love to people then we can see them with fresh eyes, we can let go of their past mistakes, cut them some slack, and give them room to grow and change. And if we can also love ourselves, as we are commanded to do, we can let go of our own past mistakes, cut ourselves some slack, and let ourselves grow and change, regardless of what the neighbours may say.

In the end, it's pretty simple. As St. John says, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God." Amen.