

Epiphany 4C

January 31, 2016

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Jeremiah 1:4-10      Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.

1 Cor 13:1-13      Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face.

Luke 4:21-30      Jesus cited God healing Gentiles and not Jews in the OT.

The prophet Jeremiah and Jesus were proclaiming God's truth to a world that did not want to hear the message they came to bring.

Jesus knew that his message was not only meant for the people of Israel; and he knew that the people of Nazareth would have a hard time accepting the idea of a prophet for everyone. They were very comfortable with their own heritage as children of Abraham, and their understanding as the people of God. They were offended by the idea that they did not hold exclusive status with God.

Jesus reminded his listeners that even though Elijah was Israel's great prophet, during the great famine he was sent to bring God's help and relief to a foreign widow of Zarephath (1 Ki. 17:8-24). Elisha, next in the line of prophets after Elijah, cleansed Naaman of leprosy; even though he was a Syrian military commander and an enemy of Israel. (2 Ki. 5:1-19).

The idea that God is among ALL people, whether they can boast ancestral ties with Abraham or not, enraged the people of Nazareth so much that they tried to kill Jesus by driving him out of town and throwing him off a cliff. They had their own ideas of how God would act, and any challenge to those tightly held beliefs shook them to the core.

Even before his birth, Jeremiah was appointed by God to be a prophet to ALL nations (Jer 1:5). The message Jeremiah was sent to proclaim was not intended just for Israel. His words were intended to uproot and destroy dysfunctional human structures everywhere, so that the way would be made clear for the kind of life the Lord intended for all. He was sent—"to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (v. 10).

Frederick Buechner wrote: *"Israel did not want to be a holy nation. Israel wanted to be a nation like all the other nations, a nation like Egypt, like Syria. She wanted clout. She wanted security. She wanted a place in the sun. It was her own way she wanted, not God's way; and when the prophets got after her for it, she got rid of the prophets; and when God's demands seemed too exorbitant, God's promises too remote, she took up with all the*

*other gods who still get our votes and our money and our 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. energies, because they are gods who could not care less whether we are holy or not, and promise absolutely everything we really want and absolutely nothing we really need.*” So there is a message here for you and me, too.

The Epistle for today is the familiar love hymn of 1 Corinthians 13. This eloquent passage is even more striking when we remember the conflict that was tearing apart the faith community at Corinth, where differing factions were arguing over who had the greater spiritual gifts. Paul was admonishing them to be ‘other-centered’, rather than self-centered. This passage is yet another NT passage, where the word in the original manuscripts for ‘love’ is agape. Paul is urging that there is no greater gift for Christians to pursue than to be able to act with self-sacrificing love for each other.

John Phillip Newell tells this story of a three-day retreat at a new monastic community led by a wise elderly monk who was to guide the participants in the essentials of community life.

On the first day, the old monk shuffled into the room, sat down, and said to them, “Today I have just one thing to say to you. God loves you. Now go away and think about that.” So off they went in their discipline of silence for the day, walking the monastic gardens and reflecting in their individual cells on the great mystery of God’s love. On the second morning, the old monk again shuffled into the room, sat down, and said, “Today I have just one thing to say to you. You can love God. Now go away and think about that.” So off they wandered for their second day of silence, pondering the great truth that God not only loves us but longs for *our* love. Not only are we the recipients of love. We are the beloved partners in an eternal love affair. On the third morning, the participants wondered: *What could possibly be next after the essential teachings of the first two days?* God loves, and we can love God. Was there anything left to add to this completeness? The old monk again shuffled into the room, sat down, and said to them, “Today I have just one thing to say to you. You are to love one another. Now go away and live this truth as a community. This is the pearl of great price, living together in love.” (From *A New Harmony: The Spirit, the Earth, and the Human Soul*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2011.)

A constant among the people of ancient Israel, and the residents of Nazareth, and the start-up church in Corinth, is that they all wanted God in their life on their own terms. How can you and I avoid the same pitfall?

Paul offers us that we can work at being ‘other-centered’ -  
Raising and educating children in a way that serves their growth, and honors  
God.

Being a husband or wife who serves our spouse and God.

Doing your day job in a way that serves your employer and God.

Considering all the people you connect with, and how you can more  
effectively share God with them.

Ensuring that the programs we take on in this parish serve others and honor  
God. The Message is: we are not blessed to be a ‘successful community’, but  
blessed to bring blessing to others.

Our meeting here in worship is a time to celebrate the agape relationship we  
share with God and with each other; and as a community, we are here to  
encourage each other in that relationship.

As you and I continue to fine tune our shared vision of God’s call for this  
faith community, as we work individually to grow into the image of Jesus  
Christ; Jeremiah and Paul and Christ teach us that God’s calling is to serve  
others; both inside and outside these walls. From before you were formed in  
the womb, before you were born, you have already been consecrated by  
God, chosen to serve. Amen.