

Those are familiar words, I suspect, for all of us. Before we look at them specifically, I want to spend some time this morning looking at how they contrast with the story in the lectionary Gospel passage for the morning and at how they are linked to our Epiphany theme and to another Epiphany story that this year's lectionary skips over. There are lessons here in all of these connections for us this morning as we consider just what the well-known words from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians mean in our lives.

Last week, I mentioned that the story in Luke of Jesus' return to Nazareth and his preaching in the synagogue there was broken into two weeks in the lectionary. Perhaps my hint was enough to tantalize you into reading the second half of the story on your own this past week or perhaps you found my summary sufficiently captivating to allow you to forego reading the rest of the story. Well, I'm not going to let you off the hook. Our Gospel reading this morning is found in Luke 4:21-30.

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

In those ten brief verses, we see a complete reversal of attitude in the congregation in Nazareth. They very quickly go from speaking well of Jesus to trying to kill him. What was it that caused this rapid and complete change of attitude in Jesus' homefolks? What did he say and what triggers did he pull in their hearts to change their approval into murderous rage? We read first not only that they spoke well of him but that they "were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." Now, the usual way to understand that statement is that they were impressed at how eloquent the carpenter's son was in his speech. Many modern translations of this passage use the words "beautiful speech" or "beautiful words." Certainly in that oral culture both eloquence and elocution were highly valued, just as they are in preachers, politicians and other public speakers today and, certainly, it would be unusual and noteworthy for them to hear a boy who'd grown up in their out-of-the-way village in humble circumstance achieve such fluency of expression. I think, however, that there is something else going on here. The Greek word translated as "gracious" or "beautiful" is *χαρις*, a word also used in the Greek Scriptures to express God's goodwill, favor or loving-kindness. The Nazarenes were amazed, at least in part, that Jesus came preaching words of love.

Now, why would that be? Why would hearing about love be so unusual? I think we can understand that if we consider the situation of Nazareth and Galilee and draw some parallels to

our own time. Galilee was an area of great revolutionary ferment in those days. Several notable groups and leaders of what we might now call insurgents harassed the Romans from bases in the Galilean hills. In an effort to control the rebels, the Romans planted cities in Galilee and filled them with loyal Romans from all over the empire, retired soldiers and recipients of political favors. Nazareth was very near at least one of these new towns and many would have come to depend on the trade for goods and services that the newcomers brought. But they wouldn't have liked it. These were Gentiles and occupiers. I imagine that the regular fare of preachers in synagogues around Nazareth were those exclusionary passages in the Scriptures. Unlike Jesus who, you will remember from last week, dropped the words "the day of vengeance of our God" from his recital of Isaiah, most preachers would likely have emphasized that phrase. Consider, if you will, the news from the Middle East today, where we hear that religious leaders are regularly stirring up their fellow Muslims against the West, or their fellow Jews against the Muslims. In Ireland, one of the chief roadblocks to peace is still the intolerant preaching of Rev. Ian Paisley, leader of the hardcore Protestants. And, closer to home, there was yet another story in Saturday's paper about Ken Hutchinson and his attacks on gays. Preaching that somebody else is causing your troubles or is God's enemy is always popular in disturbingly large sectors of the religious community. And yet, Paul tells us, love is kind and does not insist on its own way and rejoices in the truth. In his commentary on this passage, Anthony Robinson writes, "True prophets do not tell people that others are their enemy or the cause of all their problems. True prophets call their own people to account and repentance. There are a lot of false prophets saying the source of all problems is the other guys. The true prophets, then and now challenge our arrogance and complacency. And what do we do? We may try to throw them off a cliff, or just leave that church and look for one that tells us what we want to hear."

The good people of Nazareth betray another of Paul's hallmarks of true love. They are jealous. Jesus says to them, "you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" The implications are clear. Jesus has been off doing miracles, healing people and who knows what else, in Capernaum, a town with a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles. Well, why wasn't he doing these things at home, where he was needed? Wasn't his first responsibility to the people who had helped raise him, whose children he had played with as a child, who had hired his carpenter father and ignored (or not) the rather peculiar circumstances of his birth? What was he doing sharing his gifts with *those* people? Even worse, Jesus excuses his "infidelity" by pointing out stories from the scriptures in which God helped Gentiles over His own. And the people are jealous of God, as well. The Children of Israel were, of course, notoriously unfaithful to Yahweh and the Covenant over the centuries, but let them think that Yahweh might be bestowing favor on another people and they hit the roof. Paul said that love is not envious. Frederick Buechner defines envy as "the consuming desire for everyone else to be as unsuccessful as you are." The people of Nazareth certainly didn't want Capernaum getting something they weren't and should have been getting. Some versions of our scripture for the morning translate the verse as "love is not jealous."

Jealousy is one of the ugliest of human emotions. Whenever I think of jealousy, the green-eyed monster, I think of that wonderful and disturbing poem by Robert Browning called "My Last Duchess":

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
Over my Lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat": such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart — how shall I say? — too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace — all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men, — good! but thanked
Somehow — I know not how — as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech — (which I have not) — to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark" — and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
--E'en then would be some stooping, and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands

As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Jealousy. Envy. That's what the people of Nazareth began to feel toward Jesus that day, aided by the always-underlying racial hatred and resentment of occupation that must have been always close to the surface for them. And so that jealousy and envy and hatred and resentment boiled out of them. Luke tells us that they were filled with rage, murderous rage. But it was not yet time for Jesus to die and he slipped from their midst.

During Epiphany, we quite often read of another young man who was filled with murderous rage. January 25 has been celebrated over the centuries as the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. I'm sure you know the story. He was known before that epiphanous day as Saul of Tarsus. He was one of the chief enemies of the young church. He had participated, albeit indirectly, in the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He was feared by those he considered blasphemers and he was proud of it. Later in his first letter to the church at Corinth, he remembers those days: "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." Saul saw the light, literally. Today we use that phrase metaphorically, without even thinking of it, but it's deeply intertwined with Paul's story. Maybe we should sing that wonderful old Hank Williams gospel song during Epiphany, "I Saw the Light." Do you know it?

"I saw the light I saw the light
No more darkness no more night
Now I'm so happy no sorrow in sight
Praise the Lord I saw the light."

Anyway, Saul saw the light and it knocked him right off his high horse. He found the humility that we heard in his confession to the Corinthians; the humility that he says belongs to love for it is not boastful nor arrogant. In his new humility, his new awareness of God's love, Paul found the ability to write those words that have been so treasured by Christians over the centuries.

Now that we're in mind of the one who wrote those glorious words, perhaps we should consider the people to whom he wrote them. Paul didn't write this description of love to the Corinthians because he was praising them for embodying it. Quite the contrary. It doesn't take a terribly careful reading of this letter to see that it was addressed to a congregation with deep divisions. In a 1986 article for Luther Seminary, Dennis Ormseth listed the issues plaguing the Corinthians that Paul's letter confronts: "rival loyalties to different evangelists, including Paul; the value of spiritual wisdom; lax morality; legal wrangling in pagan courts; the eating of food consecrated to

idols; communal practices involving baptism, the Lord's Supper, and speaking in tongues; and the doctrine of the resurrection." Just a few minor questions. It's no surprise, really that the church at Corinth would have so many disagreements. They were a truly diverse group. Ormseth explains later in his article, "Situated in one of the most important cities of Greece in the time of the early Roman Empire, the young congregation was undoubtedly made up of persons from a variety of sub-cultures—Jews and Greeks, slaves, freedmen, and a few of noble birth, the powerful as well as the weak, the wise as well as the simple, to list the distinctions mentioned specifically by Paul. The surrounding culture was certain to have been reflected in the conflicts troubling the congregation. Sources of disruption had to include sociological, political, and religious factors, as well as personal and theological differences." This should make us sit up and take notice. We, after all, are a congregation that prides itself on theological diversity. We have other types of diversity in our congregation as well, although not much racial diversity unless you count that of Scandinavians versus non-Scandinavians. But as we look around the sanctuary this morning, we certainly see an array of people from different parts of the country, of different economic levels, with different educations, different tastes in music and movies and so on. In Corinth, all of these differences had led to proud, contemptuous and divisive attitudes. Paul had to write to them as he did because they needed to be reminded of how to love each other. Paul had to remind them, in the tongue-in-cheek words of Fredrick Niedner, "Love is patient and kind (even toward people clearly misguided, ignorant and wrong)."

So how do we hear Paul's words this morning? How can we go beyond what has become a greeting card theology of love? Can we confront our own pride, jealousies, intolerances, anger? I won't speak for anyone but myself but I know I have a long way to go in some of these areas. Are we truly humble, gentle, kind, patient? Again, as I look at my life and measure it carefully against what Paul is saying here, I am aware of many, many shortcomings. But there is Good News, for me and for anyone else who may find themselves in doubtful compliance with Paul's description of love. God's love for us will never end and as long as we continue to follow God, we will grow in love. We do not have to remain immature in love forever. I love the old Cherokee story that one evening, a wise old chief told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, "My son, the battle is between two wolves. One is Evil—it is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith." The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked, "Grandfather, which wolf wins?" The old Cherokee chief simply replied, "The one you feed." As long as we are open to the love of God in our lives, we will be feeding the goodness and love within us.

Paul is very certain of the ultimate outcome. "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." I like the way Eugene Peterson puts it in The Message: "But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly." I like that idea of loving extravagantly. It's like that other bit of greeting card or bumper sticker wisdom that one sees periodically: "Work like you don't need the money; dance like no one is watching; sing like no one is listening; love like you've never been hurt." That's how God loves us, just like we've never turned our backs on Him. That's how Jesus loves us, just like he'd never been cursed, beaten, abandoned, nailed up to die. That's the type of love that we are to let guide our every

action, every word, every thought. When we love and live like that, then we are truly in the light; then we are truly free. That's the message of love revealed in this Epiphany story. To love with God's heart is to live the abundant life indeed. May we so live and so love.