

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Way back in seminary, our preaching professor told us that the sermon was meant to address a certain question: what does the Holy Spirit want the People of God to hear from these texts on this occasion? We've talked about this before, but I think it's worth digging in again. So, this question has four parts:

What does the Holy Spirit want? That's a doozy 'cause it means taking myself out of the equation, or taking myself out as much as possible. In other words, the texts and the sermon aren't about me. Sure, my stories and my life contribute, but ultimately the focus needs to remain on God.

The People of God? Well, that's you. That's you, specifically. St. Thomas'. What's going on here, what are your concerns, and how can the sermon address those?

These texts? That's the lectionary. Some days, I really wish the texts we get weren't the ones we got, but most of the time, they work out just fine.

This occasion? Whatever day the preaching happens, whatever's going on in the world, how does that lend itself to the pulpit?

Most of the time, I try to hit all four of these pieces when I'm getting ready to preach. Sometimes, I get it right. Sometimes, I miss the mark. But that's what I'm trying for. And then once in a while, the Holy Spirit or a text or y'all or some random occurrence pops up, and the balance of the sermon that needs to be preached shifts. Y'all've heard me preach a sermon that has nothing to do with the texts of the day. Y'all've also heard me preach a twenty minute Bible Study on an especially troublesome psalm. Y'all've even heard me set the particular texts for the day aside completely because of some tragedy or evil that's arisen in the world. Sometimes, occasion wins out. But always, always, the focus must remain on God.

Well today is one of those days where it's real tempting to make these texts about me. No, I don't think the Prophet Isaiah was writing about The Rev. Brooks Cato, and no, I'm not worried that y'all are gonna jump through your Zoom screens and chase me to the edge of a cliff. These texts aren't about me, and they aren't about you, not exactly. But they do inform us, they've become a part of us, and for some, they course through our veins. Put another way, I'm no messiah, and neither are you. Jesus is just fine carrying that name by himself. We can be prophets, each and every one of us, hollering the truth at the powers of this world. But we can also be prophets in different ways, prophets of kindness and love. Meeting anxiety and fear with calmness. Stepping into a new role when the Holy Spirit gives you a gentle nudge or a rude shove.

Y'all know I haven't been quite myself since before Christmas. You know what, no. That's not the right way to say that. Y'all know I have been ill since before Christmas. I want to name that: sickness does not change who you are, it just changes the state you're in. On the day before Christmas Eve, I tested positive for Covid, and I'm still dealing with the symptoms, most notably a persistent and encompassing fatigue. Y'all that's coming up on six weeks ago, and that's a mighty long time. I've been trying to do the minimum work it takes to keep myself responsive to the church and to provide what y'all need. This is fine, sort of, but the minimum has been very taxing, and it's right at the edge of what I'm able to do. But if something were to change, if some emergency arose, some big project began, or one of y'all just needed a little extra time to sit and talk, I couldn't do it. Shoot, I don't even know if I could do an in-person service without falling asleep in the middle of the first reading! And y'all, that's no way to run a church.

But, since all this started, I have been so incredibly grateful for who you are, St. Thomas'. It's one thing to need to turn things over and just hope for the best. It's another thing altogether to be in a place like this where I can turn things over and know that everything's gonna be well-taken care of. You are a strong and capable parish, thanks be to God, but just as importantly, you are so kind and so loving. I haven't heard anyone complain about my absence or my distance. I know there's some disappointment, I feel it, too. But also, I know there're bucketfuls of love. I keep hearing the same message these past five and a half weeks: take the time you need and get well. I know that for most of you, that's so a part of your nature that it probably doesn't seem like an extraordinary thing to say, but from the churches I've served, I can promise you, it is. It is extraordinary. You are extraordinary.

Y'all know my family comes from hillbilly stock. We're hard workers but fiercely independent. We are the rugged individual to a fault. We don't ask for help, and when we're offered, we don't take it. Much as that courses through my body, I think it might be sinful. We talk a big talk about helping others, but when it comes time to accept help, we have a very hard time saying yes. Folks, it's time for me to say yes. Another seminary professor back at Sewanee told us that when we get into a new church and meet our people, "you've got to let them love you." It's a weird thing to be hesitant about that, isn't it? But so much of the way we're wired in this society makes doing that simple thing real hard. And what a shame. Life is so much more beautiful and healthy and holy when love wins out. At the risk of getting too preachy, even Paul talks about this. "If I do not have love, I have nothing." Well, folks, looking around at this beautiful church and your beautiful faces, I must be a wealthy priest, because I've got so much love coming from so many of you. What a wonderful place this is. Wonderful because it is so dang full of love. That's what we are, St. Thomas', just an incredible gathering of love in God's name, and it is such a gift being your priest.

Paul has a lot more to say about love, but where he begins speaks especially loudly to my ears right now. "Love is patient, love is kind." Y'all are making Paul proud. You have been nothing but patient and kind with me this year, but I have not extended that same kind of patient and kind love to myself. It's time for me to practice what Paul preaches, practice what I preach, and maybe most importantly to just shut up and listen to that kind and patient love y'all've been preaching back to me so insistently. So, that's what I'm gonna do. As I step back for the next several months, I'm letting your patient and kind love guide me. I have no idea what this leave holds. I have no plans but to rest and let help come and get myself out of the way when my hillbilly heart resists loving gestures. For this Spring, I don't know what's in store, but I know that my job is to get well. And your job is to keep on keeping the faith. Love with patient kindness. Calm and kind, calm and kind. As Paul says, for now, we see through a mirror dimly, but before we know it, we'll see each other again face to face.