

January 28, 2007
4th Sunday after the Epiphany

Jeremiah 1:4-10
I Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

St. Paul's, Red Wing

First Corinthians 13. St. Paul's "Love Chapter." We read it at weddings all the time. Everyone is dressed in their finest for the wedding. Everyone is smiling. Gobs of flowers are everywhere; held in nervous hands and strewn down the aisle.

Love. *Awww.*

Let's not get too mushy about love, shall we. Because the next day, someone has to negotiate who returns and pays for the tuxes, who is going to sort through the gifts, and what to do about the ugly, unusable gift from Aunt Harriet.

Love is hard work. Love is messy. Love is the hardest work you will ever do. My former college roommate said she knew her future husband really loved her and would make a good husband when he stood by her through a weekend when she had the stomach flu.

Love is hard work. Love is messy. Love is the hardest work you will every do. It is not just in a marriage, though that is hard enough. Let's

get more current. Let's get practical. Real love, hard love, means loving those whom you think are enemies. Real love, hard love, means loving and accepting those whom you think are not lovable, not acceptable.

Jesus got himself in trouble when he spoke about loving and accepting the foreigner, the enemy. He got himself in trouble when he suggested that those whom you think are outside the arms of God's mercy belong as much as the chosen people of God. "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 sever famine over the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to the widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha and none of them were cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

If I could put this in language and context that would be as jarring today, I would say, "There were many widows in the United States at the time of Elijah, yet he was sent to none of them, except to the widow in Bagdad in Iraq. There were many lepers in the U.S., in the time of Elisha, but none of them were cleansed, except Naaman, the Palestinian."

How shocking is that!!! What must Jesus be thinking?! How jarring! How shocking! What an indictment!

So much for the hometown boy made good. They chased him out of the synagogue and wanted to throw him off Barn's Bluff.

God's love is radical. God's love accuses us of our weakness. God's love calls us to more. Anne Lamott says, "God loves us so much, God accepts us just as we are. And God loves us so much, God won't let us stay that way."

God's love finds no one is the enemy.

Lutheran pastor and theologian Martin Niemöller was one of the small minority of German clergy who opposed Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime. He was arrested in 1937 and imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp for almost eight years. During much of that time he was in isolated confinement. Niemöller described a small opening in the wall of his prison cell through which he could look out and see the gallows in the courtyard. He knew that he might be one of the next to be hanged on those gallows. But as he endured the days and the weeks and the months, he realized that he did not fear dying so much. He feared that when they put the noose around his neck he would say to his Nazi executioner, "There is a God in heaven, and He is going to get you."

Niemöller continued, "If I had said that, how far my death would have been from that of the one I call Lord. If Jesus Christ had died that way, there would be no preaching of the cross, no forgiveness, no reconciliation from God's side. I do believe that it has been the greatest lesson of my life to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies. God is not even the enemy of God's own enemies."

Robert Coles, author of *Children of Crisis*, was a young Air Force doctor stationed in Louisiana during the late 1950's. A six-year-old black girl named Ruby Bridges was selected to integrate an elementary school near his base.

Every day young Ruby went to school escorted by federal marshals, and passed through a gauntlet of vindictive, jeering, spitting crowds of angry white people. (Norman Rockwell painted a famous depiction of that scene). How would she hold up, Coles wondered. He decided to do a case study. He would observe this little girl as she endured taunts and threats of death or injury day after day.

He came to the conclusion that she could not possibly handle the situation without breaking down. The verbal abuse hurled at this six-year-

old would undo her. Coles contacted her teachers and told them to call him if she showed the first signs of breaking under the stress.

He received a call from Ruby's teacher. "You had better come over quickly. She's beginning to talk to herself." When Coles arrived, the teacher confronted Ruby. "You were standing right by the window, and I saw your lips moving." But Ruby said, "I was not talking to myself. I was praying, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.'" Ruby's mother told Robert Coles, "She knows the Story." She meant that Ruby knows the story of Jesus.

Do we?

Love is hard, hard, work. It is the work that responds with patience, with kindness. It is the work that is not arrogant or rude. It is the work and discipline that does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. Love is the work that bears all things, believes all things, endures all things.

Love is the hardest work you will ever do. Let's not get mushy about it. Love is not a feeling; it is a decision. It is a commitment. Love is not all sweetness and light; it is the sweat and tears expended for one who has

treated you poorly. Love is not victimization or staying in a situation that leaves you a victim. Love is the courage to stand up for what is just and right and life-giving. Love will take all the strength, all the faith, all the stamina you can muster and more. Love will cost you everything.

When you give it, you will discover heaven on earth. When you give it, you will give your life away, and you will find your life. When you find that love within yourself and give it away, you will find that the living Savior stands beside you. You will feel the Risen Christ at work in your life. Amen.

The stories about Martin Niemöller and Ruby Bridges came from an article in "Christian Century" May – June 1997, by Charles M. Riddle, III.