

Love is the Greatest

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 4th Sunday after Epiphany, January 29, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Jesus comes to his home town. It's very near the beginning of his public ministry. He's about 30 years old. His public ministry has already been launched elsewhere; now for the first time he comes back to Nazareth where he's known and he goes to the synagogue.

When Jesus walks in, he's a celebrity. They've heard about some of his miracles. They hand him the scroll of Scripture. He reads the words of the prophet Isaiah, "I've been anointed to preach the good news to the poor. I've been sent to proclaim the release of the hostages, and the recovery of sight to the blind, and to set free those whose lives have been broken into pieces, and to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." He then sat down in the seat from which the message was delivered. In those days when the Scripture was read the congregation stood. But the sermon was delivered with the preacher sitting down. Jesus makes an amazing statement in his sermon: "The Scriptures which you've heard are this day fulfilled in your hearing." Luke tells us the reaction of everyone there was positive. "All spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth."

Then Jesus says: "Remember how there was a famine for 36 months here in Israel back in the time of Elijah. Elijah went outside Israel to a Gentile woman and helped her... not to any Jewish widow. And remember how leprosy was common in Israel in the days of Elisha the prophet... but Elisha didn't heal one leper in Israel: he healed Naaman, a Gentile, a commander of the army of Syria, Israel's arch enemy."

At that point the mood of the crowd suddenly changes. Jesus isn't so

great. They're enraged because he's telling them that Israel's God is for Gentiles as well as for Jews. And in their rage, they forcibly remove him from the synagogue and take him out to a cliff and they start to throw him off. Then in a miracle with no description given, he simply walks through their midst and goes away. As I think of that story I wonder. If Jesus had spoken with more love would the reaction of his people been different. What if he'd just left out the comments about God's love for gentiles?

Now, look at Jeremiah in our Old Testament lesson! He's just a youth. One day God speaks to Jeremiah. Don't ask me how he spoke to Jeremiah. I don't know, but Jeremiah knew. The Lord says to Jeremiah, "Before you were born I consecrated and appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then Jeremiah says, "Lord, I don't know how to speak. I'm only a teenager." But God said, "Don't say, 'I'm only a teenager because I have put my words in your mouth!'" This youth was commissioned by God to deliver an uncompromising message that would 'pluck up', 'break down', 'destroy' and 'overthrow'.

That doesn't sound very loving. Coming from a youth *his claim* to be a prophet must have come across as boastful and *his message* must have come across as arrogant and rude. Jeremiah must have come across as an irritable, resentful teenager.

And now listen to what Paul says about love. "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it's not arrogant or rude. Love doesn't rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

How does what Paul says about love fit in with the message of Jeremiah or of Jesus? Can you pluck up and break down and destroy and overthrow with love? Does love say things, like Jesus did, that will get

people angry with you? Think of how Christ, with righteous indignation, criticized the Pharisees for plundering widows' houses, rebuked those who wanted to stone a helpless adulterous woman, and drove the money changers out of the temple. Jesus really loved people and he really got angry when he saw people he loved being put down and destroyed and oppressed. He shows us that when we really love people we'll take sides against the evils that oppress people. For Jesus love and anger were not opposites. The opposite of love is not anger, it's selfishness. Love is not irritable or resentful but sometimes love expresses itself in wrath.

When Abraham Lincoln was 22 years old, he visited New Orleans and saw a slave girl being pinched, prodded, and trotted up and down the room like a horse to show what good merchandise she was. Lincoln was deeply affected. It was on this trip that he formed his opinion of slavery. Lincoln touched the arm of his companion and said tensely, "Boys, let's get away from this. If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I'll hit it hard." Lincoln loved people deeply, whatever their color. And because he loved them, his soul blazed with anger against the slave trade with an intense and relentless hatred. He fought against it with a passion until finally that evil was plucked up, destroyed and overthrown.

Recently I've been reading Winston Churchill's history of World War II. No one loved England more than Churchill, but during the 1930s he was mercilessly criticized when he warned about the growing power and ambition of Hitler. Love sometimes arouses great hostility.

In the same way, our love for God and for others will constrain us to take sides when we're confronted with moral evil. If we love the poor, the homeless and the underprivileged, we'll want to destroy the slums and ghettos which should have no place in the affluent America we all love. If

we love the young people of America, we'll do everything in our power to destroy things that hurt their character and jeopardize their future, *things* such as drugs, pornography, and materialism. People who love their neighbors most will fight against all that hurts, deprives, and oppresses their neighbors.

The Bible says that God is love. But it also says that God is a consuming fire. I think the two go together. Because God is love, God is a consuming fire. And the love God has for us is ten thousand times more intense than any human love. The Bible says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son."

When someone professes their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in the Presbyterian Church they stand before the congregation and the minister asks them questions of renunciation and of affirmation. First comes the renunciation. "Do you renounce sin?" "Do you renounce evil?" "Do you renounce all that separates you from God?" And the person responds, "I renounce them." When a person truly believes in Jesus as Lord and Savior, The Spirit of Christ comes into our hearts to pluck up and break down, to destroy and to overthrow everything in our lives that keeps us from loving God and our neighbor.

And then the minister asks, "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior?" And the person says, "I do." When a person says that and means it the Spirit of Christ comes in to build us into a holy temple. The Spirit comes in to plant seeds that will bring forth righteousness and the fruit of the Spirit.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, pluck up, tear down, destroy and overthrow everything in our hearts that keep us from fully loving you and our neighbors. Build up your kingdom within us so that this church might be a visible expression of your love for this world. This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.