The Best of the Three

January 28, 2007 (2007 Annual Meeting)

Jeremiah 1:4-10 Psalm 71:1-6 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 Luke 4:21-30

I was reluctant to use this gospel for the Sunday of our annual meeting – it seems to be a story about a preacher who nearly gets thrown off a cliff!! But at its heart, Luke's story is a gospel about mission.

Jesus is preaching in his hometown, declaring the mission statement of his ministry: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Jesus old neighbors, the folks who knew him when he was knee-high to a grasshopper are impressed at his reading, impressed at the words he declares. They like the ***idea*** of justice, they are glad to hear about "good news for the poor" and liberation for the oppressed… Right up to the moment where Jesus threatens to make it real, right to the moment where he declares "Today this scripture is being fulfilled in your hearing"

Folks start getting nervous at this point: *What is that young lay-about, Joseph's son, talking about? Who does he think he is? Who does he think* we *are? Nothing good can come out of Nazareth!*

Who are we to think that God has raised up prophets and teachers, poets and healers, in our midst? One answer, true and wonderful, is that we are chosen by God to carry out God's will, and today this scripture is being fulfilled in our hearing.

But Jesus, troublemaker to the comfortable, takes this one step further: *The truth is,* he tells them*, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heavens were shut [and there was no rain for] 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 [in the Phoenecian city of] 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."*

Look at what he's saying – two of the greatest miracles of two of the greatest prophets were not given to pious Israelites. They were given to foreigners, immigrants and aliens: The widow in Sidon, the Syrian general Naaman. It's not *insecurity* on the part of the people of Nazareth that leads them to try and throw Jesus off a cliff. Even more powerfully, it is *xenophobia*, fear of strangers, fear of foreigners.

I believe that the message from the Gospel to us on our Annual Meeting Sunday is that while God expects courage and confidence in carrying out our mission, the success of our mission will be measured not by how happy we make ourselves, but how well we serve the most marginal, the most estranged, of our neighbors. If our ministries were to only serve pledging members of the parish, then we would have stopped being a Christian community and become simply a mutual appreciation society.

This parish continues to search out new ways to reach out to our neighbors, in Auburndale and beyond: Every week, we consistently bring bags of groceries to the Newton Food Pantry, helping our neighbors right here in town. Our work isn't limited to Newton, though. We continue to support Joan Reeve's ministry with children infected with HIV in South Africa, and this year your vestry contributed part of our outreach funds to the Esperanza Academy, a tuition-free middle school for economically-disadvantaged girls in Lawrence. And your generosity to Episcopal Relief and Development has helped our church provide housing, health care, and hope to families from Afghanistan to Zambia, as well as in the Untied States.

We've opened up our sanctuary as a place of peace and solace, through the ministry of Night Prayer. We've made our buildings

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available to musicians, AA groups, the BITC day care center, and others.

And we have cared for one another as well: We have a consistently excellent Sunday School program, using the *Living the Good News* curriculum, making sure we care for the spiritual needs, curiosity and creativity of our youngest parishioners. Our Pastoral Care team has brought communion to folks who can't come to church because of illness; and through ministries such as the parish e-mail list, we all stay close to one another, praying for each other and for friends in times of need and times of celebration. We've kept our liturgy both fresh and traditional, combining ancient practices with new forms of Christian prayer, all of them meant to build us up as part of the body of Christ.

And in all these things, all this ministry and prayer, even the moments of 'busy work,' we carry out our mission in love. As Paul reminded that little church in Corinth, it is the work of love that is the first and most important calling of every Christian:

If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.

If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing.

If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere.

So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

Whether you are serving at the altar or on the vestry, as a reader or greeter, a Sunday School teacher, a faithful pledger…Your most basic and your most important ministry is love.

This is a wonderful community, the most loving and healthy congregation I've ever been blessed to work with. We are doing good work in our community and in the world. We are taking care of one another. We are being good stewards of our buildings and we're making our building available to a wide range of people and groups. We are encouraging one another's gifts – teachers and poets and artists and musicians. We are growing, slowly and steadily in numbers, and steadily and clearly in faith Our liturgy and music, the quality of our Sunday School, the warmth of our hospitality and the extent of our outreach and mission
all belie our small size – the littlest birds *do* sing the prettiest songs!

Over the next year, we will continue to discern our mission and ministry, as individuals and as congregations. We've already come a long way from our self-study and mission statement of five years ago; during the next year we will be listening for where God is calling us.

But already, our faith tells us two things about where God is calling us: God is calling us to reach beyond ourselves, and God is calling us to do and believe all things in *love*.

As Paul wrote to the little church in Corinth: *We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing God directly just as God knows us!*

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. And the best of the three is love.

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