

EPIPHANY IV

When I saw that 1 Corinthians 13 was the reading set for today, I was anxious! Strangely, it seems that it is easier to preach on a text that is problematic than one so stunningly obvious as this majestic hymn to love. I would rather tackle, for example, a difficult passage where Jesus threatens hell and damnation, one in the Old Testament where God's chosen people demonstrate unspeakable violence, or one of those bizarre prophecies in the Book of Revelation than be forced to raise up something fresh and new about love. Frankly, the best approach is simply to let this passage stand on its own merits – why bother to preach on it at all?

Love is, as the old Joan Baez song tells us, is just a “four-letter word,” a word that has breathtaking power and yet can be reduced to the most vulgar cliché. Jesus poured out his **love** for us on the cross, Mother Theresa demonstrated her profound **love** for the poor, sick and the outcast in the slums of Calcutta and Father Damian lived out the **love** of **Jesus** among the lepers of Kalaupapa. How is it possible that the same word we use for selfless compassion is also used to mean the exact opposite? Porn sites and Nevada brothels sell us **love**, as does the advertising industry and every imaginable attempt to lure us to spend our money on things that we will simply **love**. I remember when it was an awesome, even holy, event when a person said they loved you – in fact, I come from a culture where even parents could barely utter the word to their own children. Yet, today I've noticed that young people habitually say, when hanging up the phone, not just “goodbye,” but “I love you!” Do they mean it?

Shakespeare was so right in saying that “the course of true love never did run smooth.” He was, of course, referring to the the rigours of romantic love, but is that not also true of every kind of love? The Greeks had the advantage of a more subtle language that distinguished between three different states for which we universally employ the word “love.” This is, frankly, a rare example of the English language, generally one of the more complex and multi-layered languages, being pathetically inadequate. The Greek *eros* means sexual and romantic love, while *philia* refers to our affection for family and friends, and *agape* connotes compassion, sacrificial love and the kind of self-giving that never demands reward or compensation. How incredibly useful it would be if English were to adopt Greek words for all the confusing things we lump under the word “love!” How much misunderstanding and heartache might we eliminate from our lives!

The love that really interests us today is, of course, *agape*, the word that St. Paul immortalizes in 1 Corinthians 13. Like all the letters of Paul, Corinthians is a real letter written in response to real and serious issues that the Church in Corinth was dealing with. In other words, Paul wasn't writing with the intention that his epistles would become Scripture. However, what he wrote to address specific circumstances was considered so critical to the lives of the churches he ministered to that they saved these letters and their wisdom so touched them that the Church honored them as canonical Scripture. Clearly, the Christians at Corinth were so hung up with what I would call the byproducts of religion that they missed the whole point of what Jesus came to teach and live: *agape*. They spoke in *glossalalia*, ecstatic tongues, and thought that was really

cool, but that was nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. They thought they had clever prophetic powers and subtle knowledge of the mysteries of the universe, but this was nothing compared to *agape*. Even deep faith or suffering for the sake of that faith was useless when not accompanied by the compassion that constitutes *agape*. Paul then outlines in exquisite detail to the Corinthians what love looks like, and its “course never does run smooth,” for the way of true *agape* is hard and is the way of sacrifice, the way of the Cross. It involves letting go of self and seeing into the heart of others, blessing them in their humanity, refusing to allow our prejudices and desire for self-aggrandisement to block the flow of grace to them. *Agape* blesses others! Paul informs us that love is patient, kind, not envious or boastful, or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way, isn't irritable or resentful; doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Wow! How is it possible to live the life of true love? I **so** love my resentments, my arrogance, my pride, indeed having it my way all at all times. It's not fun at all not to get my own way, not to get the better of other people! This thing called *agape* is surely obsolete because it is so utterly counter-cultural and doesn't at all fit well into the competitive post-modern, technocratic world that we have created.

But there is another way, which we can choose by God's grace (which, trust me, is required!) I honestly believe that here in Hawai'i we have an enormous advantage, not because of the gorgeous weather, exquisite scenery and amazing water sports, but because of the *aloha* spirit of our host culture. Seriously, I am here not because of the nice beaches, but because I know of no other place I have ever been where people see into the hearts of others and bless them in their humanity. I feel it every time I return to the Mainland and miss the warmth, respect and humor I mostly feel from people here, and not just Hawaiians, but many of the *malihini* who fetch up on these shores and, despite themselves, absorb the *aloha* spirit. It struck me several years back when reading in the Archives many letters written in Hawaiian in the 19th century that the greeting of “Aloha e Kimo,” didn't mean the vapid “dear Kimo” that it does in English, but actually meant “Love to you, O Kimo!” because sometimes these letters were translated by the writer with those very words. Think of it: a culture where the greeting isn't just “hello” or “ola” or “bonsoir”, or even “Shalom,” but “I love you!” The remarkable thing is that Hawaiians really meant it, and to their chagrin, ruthless foreigners took advantage of their genuinely compassionate and generous hearts! Indeed, the missionaries consistently commented negatively on the Hawaiian unwillingness to adopt the acquisitive nature of Westerners, criticising the Hawaiian tendency not to keep any money they had earned, but to give it away to beloved family and friends. The miracle of the Hawaiian people is that, despite it all, they have not lost the *aloha* spirit and all of us who are blessed to live here are frequently reminded that seeing the beauty in the souls of others is key to our own happiness. “**Inā i 'ōlelo au i ka 'ōlelo a nā kānaka a me nā 'ānela, a i loa' a 'ole ke aloha, ua like au me ke keleawe kanikani a me ke kimebala wala' au.**” “If I speak in the tongues of mortals or of angels, but do not have love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” Needless to say, the Hawaiian Bible employs the word *aloha* liberally in 1 Corinthians 13.

Today is, of course, our Annual Meeting. I am here to tell you that I earnestly believe that St. John's is a community that is defined by both *aloha* and *agape* to a degree that I have never seen in my almost 44 years of ministry – I mean it. I see it in both the active serving ministries of this parish and in the warmth and sweet *aloha* manifested by so many in this community. I am so happy to serve here and my charge to you this day is that, as the world sadly continues to change

and conform to a more competitive, less compassionate manner of being, that you continue to be a rare beacon of both old Hawaiian *aloha* and Christian *agape*. I've been touched that here people see into the hearts of others and bless them in their humanity. Please never cease to be this light in a world that needs the illumination of God's love more than ever.