

**Sermon for 3 Epiphany, Year A – January 26, 2020**  
**Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio**  
**The Rev. Judith L. Rhodes**

**Living a Cruciform Life: In the Name of Jesus, For the Sake of Love**

Growing up, as I did, in a faithful Irish-Catholic family (my mother's family) and attending Roman Catholic schools for so many years, I will never forget my complete and utter disagreement even as a 6 ½ year old when I heard a priest say that only Roman Catholics were going to heaven. I remember my arm shooting up in the air (as if it were an autonomic response) as he visited my first grade classroom and I distinctly remember the furrowed brow of Sister Ellen Peter as she noticed my arm waving in the air, awaiting Father Collins' acknowledgment of me. Well, finally, he did notice me and I stood and took him to task right before my class. Of course, it was pre-Vatican II theology of the Roman Catholic Church being taught but this precocious girl-child simply wasn't having it.

You see, my paternal grandparents were Officers in the Salvation Army and missionary servants of faith in Jesus Christ. I knew how much they loved Jesus. I knew their lives were shaped by sacrifice and a vibrant, joyful faith that was reflected in every hymn they sang, every decision they made, every relationship they nurtured. I knew deep down in my heart, deep down as if in my very soul, that a God who would judge such lives as unworthy of heaven was never going to be a God in whom I could believe, let alone trust and follow. "No, Father Collins, I think you are wrong," I heard myself saying.

Well, I marched home that day and told my parents what the priest had to say. And I recognized in their hesitancy that they were struggling, too, that they could not or would not accept the lesson Father Collins' tried to teach my class that day. That precocious girl-child just got more and more agitated, inquisitive, and down-right defiant when it came to asking the hardest questions of an institution, even if it was, the church. And look where it landed me... in a pulpit... and on most days, having more questions rather than answers about how religious institutions, political institutions, educational institutions, health-care institutions order their moral and ethical values and decisions, the spirit of that child still keeps me company.

In her exquisite book, *The Wisdom Jesus*, The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault, Episcopal priest, teacher, retreat and conference leader, writes:

*What I'm about to suggest as the starting point for exploration is that all this knowing about Jesus actually gets in the way of our faith. Living our Christianity with 20/20 hindsight lands us in trouble in at least two ways. First of all, it lulls us into a false sense of security: that we're the winning team, that as Christians we'd recognize and know Jesus when he showed up. ... Across the board... forward movement seems to have slowed to a halt in the violent polarization between left wing and right wing, between those labeled liberal and conservative, between, well, you name the labels.*

*Some would call this an apocalyptic season. (but) I believe that there is an opportunity as Perhaps there hasn't before to really open up the core questions again and ask, "What is it that we mean by being a Christian, by Christianity?" What is this filter that we're looking through? Who is this Master we profess to follow and confess in our life as we call ourselves, Christian?*

She goes on to write:

*If you were to imagine the great world religions like the colors of the rainbow, each one witnessing in a particular way to some essential of the divine fullness, Christianity would unquestionable hold down the corner of incarnation – by which I mean the vision of God in full solidarity with the created world, fully at home within the conditions of finitude, so that form itself poses no impediment to divinity. ... At its mystical best, Christianity reverberates with the warmth of this assurance: with the conviction that creation is good, that God is for us, and that what ultimately gets worked out in the sacred mystery of Jesus' passage through the human realm is a profound testament to Love.*

In Jesus, we see, hear, taste, touch, and feel, God's profound testament to Love. And so it would seem to me that the only measure, the only standard, the only way we can judge or be judged is by the standard that is Love alone. And so, a question worth asking whenever we are faced with an important decision in our life, may be this... "Is this decision, action, gesture, I am about to make, consistent with the testament to Love?" This question does not eliminate the sting, the challenge, even the pain and struggle of making a loving decision. Point of fact, it may make it even more difficult to do and to be about Love.

It was so difficult for me to focus this week on the text from first Corinthians. Every time I listen to the news, or turn on the television, even open up my email accounts, it feels like an assault, clashes of divisive, violent rhetoric, name-calling, and warring madness all around. Paul seems to have something to say to us today as we find ourselves drowning in division, in factions, in quarrels, in choosing sides over ethical and moral relationships.

One commentator this week wrote:

Paul identifies issues that cause divisions. ... What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul' or 'I belong to Apollos' or 'I belong to Cephas' or 'I belong to Christ.' ... Paul is referring to those who give their allegiance to human leaders but what does he mean when he says, 'I belong to Christ?'

That's the question at the heart of this text, isn't it? And it seems that the response to this question is all about the testimony of faith we recognize in Jesus Christ, the testament to Love.

Paul admonishes the Corinthians " ... that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you but to be united in the same mind and the same purpose." Fellow Reconcilers, we human beings so often wrongfully confuse unity with uniformity. I believe that the lesson we need to hear and learn and enact in our lives is the lesson that places the highest value of our faith in the testament to Love.

Love does not mean that we are always of the same mind. It does mean that we are always of the same spirit, the spirit of mutuality, respect, and love. We can and must agree to disagree and always in the spirit of generosity and respect even as we struggle to see in one another in the heat of disagreement, the image and likeness of God. That can be so very challenging to us. It can feel so impossible. And yet, if you and I are committed to living as followers, imitators of Christ, we must seek to be those who practice the discipline that Love demands from us.

So, we must ask, "Is what I am about to say, be heard in the interest of Love?" "Is what I am about to write, be understood as a loving response?" "Is what I am thinking about... reflective of my love for this brother or sister, this person made in the image and likeness of God?"

We, in the Episcopal/Anglican tradition dare to describe our way of love, our way of life as “the via media” the middle way. That is a compelling orientation toward life... to live in such a way that when we find ourselves on the far edges of an opinion, of a decision, of an unchallenged belief, we seek a middle way. When we engage in a conversation that is difficult in its disagreement, can we move toward the other as we hold the tension of “respectfully agreeing to disagree?”

Our unity is rooted in our identity as the Body of Christ. The body of Christ in which Paul also references our need for one another...

*We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love. (Romans 4:14-16)*

Paul’s final words reflect his theology of the cross. The cross which taken only for what it seems to depict, points only to death. But for the believer in the cross of Christ, the cross is but an instrument leading to new life, unencumbered by disagreements, divisions, even death itself. The cross points, therefore, to a life in which we are redeemed, reconciled, restored and renewed. A life that is lived as a witness to the cross of Jesus Christ is a life redeemed by Love to live as lovers, healers, and reconcilers in the world.

That’s the call Jesus issues to his first followers. That’s the call he issues to us. Will we leave our old and comfortable ways of being, of belonging, of believing behind? Do we dare to follow Jesus in his Way of Love? Do we dare live a cruciform life, a life of Love, in the name of Jesus Christ in a world that would have it any other way? Let’s try and try again. In the name of Jesus. For the sake of Love.

Amen.