

Sunday January 29th, 2017
4th after Epiphany

PRAYER: Gracious God, in Jesus Christ you introduced yourself as the help of the hopeless and the hope of the helpless, and you called us to proclaim your name and portray your character. With gladness we heeded your summons. But our enthusiasm has waned, and your mission has suffered. So we pray, O Lord, for the renewal of our vision of Jesus Christ, that our enthusiasm for his mission might be rekindled and that, once again, the helpless might find hope and the hopeless might find help. Amen.

OFFERTORY SENTENCE: One of the things we often forget or wish we could forget is God's call on us to give the very best of ourselves and our resources to him. God is not to receive our leftovers but is to receive the first gains of all we receive in this life. King Solomon reminds us of this fact when he writes in Proverbs 3:9, "Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops." We should therefore give to God nothing less than our very best.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: O God, if love is patient, why are we so irritable? If love is kind, why are we hostile? If love is not jealous or boastful, why do we flaunt our achievements in the presence of others? O God, in Jesus you have shown love which forgives imperfection; only in him can we forsake childish ways. Forgive our lack of love, and have mercy upon us.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: Remember that God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. God sent Christ in order to fulfill the law. Now we walk according to the Spirit, who bears witness with our spirit that we are God's children. Friends, claim your legacy; we are forgiven.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious God, our Lord and Saviour, we turn to you in grateful confidence, for you are no stranger to us. Were it not for your initiative to reach us you could be a stranger. For we find ourselves struggling at times to put distance between you and ourselves, but even when we believe we have succeeded in creating distance you come and reveal your close proximity to us. You just will not let us go, and for this we are eternally grateful. In every aspect of your interactions with us we are reminded at how precious and undeserving your love for us is. In your character we find a power we cannot manipulate, a goodness we cannot match, a love we cannot deny; for this, dear Lord, we bless you and pray for your blessing upon us. So, in these moments of clarity, we ask that your power be not merely an object of awe but a true source of renewal in this church; let your goodness become to us not merely a thing of envy but a model for life; let your love become to us not merely an inescapable force but a contagious presence, that we might remember not only to whom we should give thanks, but why.

We voice this plea, O Lord with hesitation. Not that we doubt your intentions or your ability to accomplish them. We know that before we move in love toward you, you have already moved in love toward us; before we seek you, you have already sought us. Nevertheless, we do hesitate, for we are saddled with memories-vivid memories, bitter memories-of the times we failed to conform our action to your intention: when those in life's quicksand might have been rescued, but we did not extend a helping hand; when the cause of justice might have been advanced, but we did not plead its case; when the obstacles to a healthy environment might have been removed, but we did not lend our strength. We would like to forget: the times when you said to pluck up, and we continued to plant; the times you said to go here, and we went there; the

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times you said do this, and we did that; the times you said to speak boldly, and we spoke timidly, if at all.

When we review these times, we are astounded, O Lord, that you remain near to hear us and to receive us and to forgive us; that you stand ready, even though we repeatedly make you our second choice, to offer us a second chance. So we approach you in repentance and hope, chastened by your ability to remember, yet encouraged by your readiness to forget.

O God, turn our eyes from our unalterable past to our open future: from the hateful words we have spoken to the healing words we can speak; from the thoughtless deeds we have done to the thoughtful deeds we yet can do; from the worthless causes we have supported to the worthwhile causes we can yet support; from the uncaring society we have shaped to the caring society we yet can shape.

O Lord, the world is full of people we yet can help. Open our eyes, that we might see them; our hearts, that we might love them; our mouths, that we might defend them; and our hand, that we might assist them, as together we seek to discern and do your will, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

BENEDICTION: O Lord, as you have become our refuge from the world's injustice, send us forth into the world to become a refuge for its victims. Let your light so illumine us that they not only might discover the path to peace with justice, but find the courage to make it a wide highway.

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1 Corinthians 1:18-31
“Such Foolishness, Such Love!”

At a church picnic, Luke met Emily, the girl of his dreams. They spent the entire day together, basking in each other’s company. As they walked home down the country road from the park, Luke thought he’d take a chance and kiss Emily. There was however, one problem: Luke was about five feet tall; Emily was closer to six feet tall. Unable to reach her ruby lips, Luke’s heart was breaking until he saw a tree stump ahead.

Pulling the heavy stump out of the ground, he pushed it over to Emily, stood on it, and gave her a long, passionate kiss. Then they walked on again to Emily’s home. When finally they arrived at Emily’s house, Luke said, “Can I kiss you again?” “Well, I don’t know,” Emily said, blushing. “I mean...” Luke interrupted her, “If I don’t have a chance, please tell me. I’m tired of carrying this here stump.”

What is it about love that leads people to throw caution and reason out the window? Norm Crosby wrote, “Teenagers don’t know what love is. They have mixed up ideas. They go for a drive, and the boy runs out of gas, and they smooch a little, and the girl says she loves him. That isn’t love. Love is when you’re married twenty-five years, smooching in your living room, and he runs out of gas, and she still says she loves him. That’s love!” Have you noticed that love seems to be utterly ridiculous at times?

We have all seen, or experienced, people doing the strangest things because of love. Grown men and women lose all ability to think clearly, speak clearly, or focus on anything else. Men will buy flowers, jewelry and other trinkets: that they would normally never even look at, to woo their beloved. Women will go so far as to feign interest in sports, go fishing, or other activities they dislike, just to prove their love for their man or at least until their married.

Grown, otherwise sensible people, will march into a card store, and buy greeting cards that ooze out great gobs of sentimentality all trying to express feelings that seem to defy words. Actually, on that thought let me pass on to you, a money saving strategy my parents once employed. It was near Valentine’s Day, and Mom and Dad were in Hallmark looking for Valentine’s Day cards for each other.

Having made their particular selection for each other, they presented them to each other while still in the store. Then having read them, they simply returned them to the card rack, thus saving the cost of buying the card. On that same note, how many of us have stuffed animals, compilation CDs with loves songs, or assorted nick knacks that were given to us as tokens of affection?

Paul McCartney, the former Beatle, was far more prophetic than we give him credit, when he composed his frothy little ditty, *Silly Love Songs*. He sings, “You think that people would have had enough of silly love songs. It seems that it isn’t so. And what’s wrong with that, I’d like to know. Because here I go again.” On that same note, I have noticed that some popular songs almost come across as religious devotion.

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Popular songs talk of a love one: saving their souls, bringing meaning to their lives, and equating physical contact to being in heaven. Have you ever noticed what happens sometimes, when men, particularly young men, do something to express their affection for a young lady, and their friends find out? The card, flowers, poem they wrote, or the walking the beloved home after school, gives rise to some serious ribbing from friends. The young man in question will blush out of embarrassment. Embarrassment for how love made them act out of character. It's silly!

It's love after all. It makes us crazy. We can't help ourselves. We will do anything, say anything, and buy anything; to win the heart of someone we are attracted to and maybe in love with. Well what I find fascinating, is that when the Apostle Paul looked at how God expressed his love for us, he saw how this could look so foolish to people. God's saving work in Christ appears to those examining it carefully, to be silly, or ridiculous.

The very height, of God's demonstration of love that we see in the crucifixion, offended the Jews, and absolutely made no sense to the Greeks. Jesus' death by crucifixion was in the minds of both communities a silly idea. The Jews were offended, because the only sign they received of God's saving work in Christ was the crucifixion. This caused no end of difficulties for Jews to believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

Mostly because the Old Testament tells us that anyone who dies nailed to a tree is cursed by God. Deuteronomy 21:22-23 reads, "Is someone has committed a crime worthy of death and is executed and then hanging on a tree, the body must never remain on the tree overnight. You must bury the body the same day, for anyone hanging on a tree is cursed of God." It was as Paul claims, a "stumbling block" to faith.

The Greeks found talk of God incarnate being killed on a cross absolutely silly, because in their world view, gods were heroic, albeit self-centered, beings. For anyone to claim that a god showed any form of weakness, was a heresy and thoroughly illogical. In the minds of the Jews and Greeks, at the time of Paul's writing, people wanted to see God or in the Greek's minds, gods plural, as being strong.

Do you remember those occasions, in Jesus' time on earth, when his fellow Jews demanded a sign? "Show us a sign!" they demanded. Why, did they demand this? Obviously they wanted proof, but proof of what? Clearly they wanted proof of power. In their understanding of the nature of God, limited as it was, God could do anything; therefore God's Messiah should be able to do anything.

Jesus, of course, did many signs. He healed, fed the multitudes, raised people from the dead, but it was never enough. Therefore it seems incredible, but the Jews and the Greeks both shared a similar desire in their theology.

I suspect people share that same desire today and that is probably why faith eludes so many people. What people want more than anything from God, or perhaps even gods plural, if that is what you believe, is to be able to ask for anything, at any time, and have it delivered like a cosmic UPS service.

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In other words, whether by faith, by prayer, by sacrifice, or whatever the tool of choice was, they wanted to control the Almighty. This plan in the bible, which Paul claims was God's plan, is foolish to Jews and Greeks and many Canadians. It's downright silly. How can Jesus' crucifixion ever hope to accomplish anything? And yet, Paul writes, "This 'foolish' plan of God is far wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is far stronger than the greatest human strength."

Then he adds something that would have made his readers just shake their heads at the illogical nature of it. "God deliberately chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful." In other words, God took what we might consider the prudent course of action to save people and turned it on its head.

This strategy by God, reminded me of a story I read some time back. It is a legend that recounts the return of Jesus to heaven after his time on earth. He returned bearing the marks of His earthly pilgrimage with its cruel cross and shameful death. The angel Gabriel approached Him and said, "Master, You must have suffered terribly for people down there." "I did," Jesus said.

"And," continued Gabriel, "Do they now know all about how you loved them and what you did for them?" "Oh, no," said Jesus. "Not yet. Right now, only a handful of people in Palestine know." Gabriel was perplexed. "Then what have you done," he asked, "to let all people know about your love for them?" "Well, I've asked Peter, James and John, and a few others to tell people about me."

"Those who are told will in turn tell others, and the Gospel will be spread to the farthest reaches of the globe. Ultimately, all of humankind will hear about me and what I have done on their behalf." Gabriel frowned and looked skeptical. He knew that people weren't dependable. "Yes," he said, "but what if Peter and James and John grow weary? What if the people who come after them forget?"

And what if, way down in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, people get too busy to bother telling others about you? Haven't you made other plans? "No, I've made no other plans Gabriel," Jesus answered. "I'm counting on them." (Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks, pg. 101)

To our human thinking, it all sounds so very weak, this plan by God to win the world. You got to wonder; where is the power, the pizzazz, the earth shattering signs? Yet, the plan was to have Christ die on the cross, and entrust the message and witness of that demonstration of love, to a handful of followers. And yet, as silly as this plan seems to the wisest of minds, it worked and is working.

The birth and growth of the Corinthian church, and all the new churches Paul help to plant, is proof the strategy works. The fact, that First Baptist Church exists and you are here today, is proof the strategy works. Maybe the reason God's plan works so well, is because when it comes to love, sometimes what we believe to be silly, works. Love has a wisdom all its own. Maybe, dare I say it, that love seems to transcend wisdom. I mean, how else do you explain what happens when love is involved.

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We enjoy saying, “love is blind”, when we encounter couples whose compatibility seems so off. We hear of people sticking it out with a sick loved one, when common sense tells us it would be better for them to end the relationship.

How can we explain it, when a person talks about their difficult childhood, with an abusive parent or alcoholic parent, and yet they still say they love their mom or dad? How can we explain why a Holy, perfect God, would send his one and only Son, to die on an accursed cross, for people such as us? People who are never perfect, who are rebellious, and downright hostile to God and to one another.

Paul writes in his letter to the Romans these wonderful words of love, “For all have sinned; all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Yet now God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins... We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed his blood, sacrificing his life for us.” (Romans 3:23-25)

Love is the power. John in his epistle said that “God is love”. Love is a major part of what defines the character of God. Paul said later on in this letter, “There are three things that will endure-faith, hope and love-and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor. 13:13) As human beings we seem to know instinctively the power of love. We admire, celebrate and encourage love that is self-giving and sacrificial.

Our heroes are men and women who gave everything they have to save someone else out of love. There is: Mother Theresa, Norman Bethune, Martin Luther King Jr., and mothers and fathers everywhere. Even in works of fiction, the power of love is prevalent. What saved Harry Potter when he was an infant? It was love; his mother’s love. What drove Forest Gump in so much of what he did? It had to be his love for Jenny.

God loves us. God loves us with a love that defies human logic. God loves us with no thought to himself. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” God’s love was demonstrated on the cross, even with no guarantee that anyone would respond with love back. Oh, how he loves us! The crucifixion is a love story; actually it is the greatest love story ever told. Its power transcends time, culture, gender, age, geography and even our human sense of wisdom.

Now that we see the depth of this love, how shall we respond?

A preacher was leaving Victoria Station in London. Sitting across from him in the little train compartment were two men in their late thirties. About ten minutes out of the station, one of the men had an epileptic seizure. His eyes rolled back and his body trembled. The man rolled off the seat onto the floor and shook uncontrollably.

It was a shocking thing to see. His friend lifted the stricken man up and put him back on the seat, took off his overcoat, and put it around him as a blanket. He rolled up a newspaper and put it in his mouth, lest the man bite his tongue.

Then with great compassion, he lovingly blotted the beads of perspiration on the epileptic man’s forehead. After a few minutes, the seizure ended with the same abruptness with which it began, and the stricken man dropped into a deep sleep.

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It was then that his friend turned to the preacher and said, "You'll have to forgive us. He doesn't have these seizures very often, but we never know when they are going to strike him."

"We were in Vietnam together," he continued. "We were both wounded. I lost a leg." Pointing to his right leg he said, "This is an artificial leg. I've learned to walk on it very well. My friend here had half his chest blown away by a hand grenade. There was shrapnel all through his chest, and every time he moved he experienced great pain.

The helicopter that was supposed to rescue us was blown from the sky by an enemy rocket, and with that explosion we knew that all hope for rescue was gone. It was then that my friend somehow picked himself up. He screamed in pain with every move he made, but somehow he stood to his feet. Then he reached down and grabbed hold of my shirt and started to pull me through the jungle. I tried to tell him to give up on me.

I pleaded with him to save himself if he could, and I kept telling him there was no way he was going to get us both out of the jungle. I'll never forget him saying, 'Jack, if you die in this jungle, I'm going to die here with you.' I don't know how he did it, mister, but step by step, scream by scream, he pulled me out of that mess. He saved my life!"

"A year ago I found out that he had this condition and that somebody had to be with him all the time. So I closed down my condo in New York, sold my car and came over here to take care of him. That's our story. I hope you understand." The minister responded by saying, "Don't apologize. I'm a preacher. Whenever I come upon a good story, I'm thrilled. And this is one of the best stories I've heard in a long, long time."

The man replied, "Hey! Don't be impressed. You see, after what he did for me, there isn't anything I wouldn't do for him." (Tony Campolo, Let me tell you a Story, pg. 91)

A Christian is someone who recognizes what Jesus did on the cross to accomplish salvation, and in response says to Jesus, "After what you did for me, there isn't anything I wouldn't do for you."

The world might think this is all silly, illogical, ridiculous, but those of us who have been touched by the love of Christ, know better. Maybe we should end with the rest of Paul McCartney's thoughts on *Silly Love Songs*. He concludes by singing.

All I know is that when I'm in it, it isn't silly; love isn't silly, it isn't silly at all. Amen.