

## **Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**Sunday January 31, 2010**

Epiphany 4C 2010

*(Sermon delivered from notes – this is a recreation):*

In the name of our one living God – ever creating, ever loving, ever sustaining: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's Gospel lesson picks up exactly where we left off last week. Jesus has returned to his hometown of Nazareth after his baptism and a successful ministry of teaching and healing in Galilee. The buzz about him has preceded him to Nazareth. He is in the synagogue and has just read from the Book of Isaiah verses he has selected and he has declared the Year of the Lord's favor is present in himself.

All three synoptic Gospels have this account, but Luke places it right at the beginnings of Jesus' ministry. He makes it Jesus' acceptance speech or mission statement: good news for the poor, release of captives, and freedom for the oppressed. This is what Jesus will preach and live out. But Luke is also preparing us right upfront for how Jesus' ministry will end in violent rejection.

At first Jesus' listeners were impressed and spoke well of him. But then second thoughts entered their hearts. Who is he? Isn't he just the son of Joseph the carpenter and Mary? Where does he get all this from? Let him show us some miracles like you did elsewhere! If he, what will be in it for us?

Jesus knew what they were thinking and so he stopped them short by letting them know he knew. Then he dropped a bomb on their self-righteous certainty. He pointed out from their history found in their own Scripture (First and Second Book of Kings) two instances when God's grace and mercy were shown not to the "in crowd" the good Jews of Judea, but to two outsiders – foreigners, one a starving unimportant widow and her son from Sidon and the other

a foreign general from Syria.

Like the crowds in Jerusalem, they took offence and turned on him and behaved as enemies. Their hearts simply weren't open to Jesus' message of God's radical forgiveness and his gift of grace and love for all peoples. Many people are still not ready for this. They seem to know just whom God loves and just whom God does not love. They know the exact boundaries of God's grace and care.

Our reading from the first letter to the Corinthians finds Paul in a similar situation. Does anyone recognize this passage? Where do we hear it most often? Yup, that's right, at weddings. I'd say about 80% of the brides I've married have chose this passage to be read. Our rereading last week of Chapter 12 prepares us for hearing Chapter 13. I'll give you a bit of historical background. Corinth was then a new city founded in Southern Greece to be the center of trade in the Empire. It was filled with people from all over the known world and everyone was on the make. It was like California in Gold Rush days. The prevailing attitude was "What's in it for me". There was a zero sum mentality – If someone else gets something that means that I get less. This was a sure fire recipe for greed, jealousy and resentment.

It's not surprising that in such an environment the church in Corinth was always on the point of breaking apart. There was constant dissension. They couldn't even behave at the weekly celebration of the Eucharist! Paul had his work cut for him with this crowd! In Chapter 12, which we read last week, Paul used the metaphor of the human body to demonstrate the interdependence of each member of the Church. Not all had the same gifts, but each was person had talents that were needed. Thus, everyone was important whatever their gifts. Remember learning This Little Light of Mine in Sunday school? I use that song to teach the kids that each and every one of them has a special gift and that each of them is both unique and important. I'm preaching Paul to them but they don't know it!

In today's lesson -Chapter 13 – he calls each of us out of ourselves and points to a way of

generous forgiveness that allows on to hope for all things, forgive all things! It's not easy, but it is the only way out of the "what's in it for me" individualism that is rampant today. That's how Christians got their name. Small in number in the first century, they were noticed by their charity and love for others – they could forgive because they knew that they were forgiven! We all fail; we all fall short at times. The only way to get into a future or even hope for a future is getting past the personal hurt of the present. A good lesson for weddings!

But most people don't get past the "Love lasts forever" line in verse 8. We forget the rest of the chapter. We forget Paul's call to what I would term "faithful agnosticism". No, I'm not saying that we should leave here agnostics. But Paul cautions us: "Don't think we know it all! Don't think that our way is the best way or even the only way!"

The kind of Love Paul is talking about is built on a foundation – the foundation of humility. Humility is built on the realization that we don't know everything and everything we do know, we only know incompletely. That is Anglicanism at its best! It is in this space of "not knowing" that we are open to learning, open to hope for new possibilities.

In a world afflicted with ideological and religious fundamentalism, this kind of humility that opens us to growth and understanding is sorely needed.

Amen.