

**The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza**  
**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
**The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – January 30, 2022**  
**1 Corinthians 13:1-13**

I have to say that, so far, 2022 has been a big letdown. Such high hopes I had that, after last year, surely things would get better. Alas, 2022 has not started off promising. True, we haven't yet had an insurrection, but that is a pretty low bar.

Noted 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Karl Barth is famously quoted as saying that all preachers should do so with the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Well, the news headlines so far have hardly given me spiritual inspiration to these four weeks into the new year. In fact, it's only been stories about animals that have stirred my heart and inspired my mind. I tried so hard two weeks ago to find a way to preach about the heart-warming story about a Canadian couple's three cats who literally were sitting vigil 24-hours a day on top of a box containing a newly purchased Vitamix blender. And they did so for over three weeks.

The sheer obstinacy of the cats had prevented their owners from opening the box and making the smoothies they had been looking forward to. This epic kitchen standoff, in the face of two years of tragedy and all-around awfulness, had become an internet sensation with tens of thousands following each update on the feline-human stalemate. Sadly, I just couldn't find a way to make this humorous Mexican standoff relate to Jesus' miracle of changing water into wine.

Now, I happen to agree with Barth that one needs to ground the scripture lessons in our immediate, lived experience. But I've found it hard to find that golden thread of hope in the recent news headlines that I also think is necessary for preaching the good news of God in Christ. I did find joy, however, in reading about the scientists in Israel who have determined that even a simple goldfish can learn how to operate and direct a fishtank/robot-cart across a room to a target. Have you seen the video? Amazing! My favorite part is that they call this tank/cart a "fish-operated vehicle," an FOV for short.

And then Friday, I was tickled beyond all reason to read in the Post that we now have an official First Cat! After much anticipation and speculation, she has arrived and her name is Willow. Now I can't make myself read all the way through news articles on the growing international crisis on the Ukraine border, but I read every word about Ms. Willow and how she is adjusting to life in the White House. Dr. Biden reports that the two-year old gray and white tabby is "settling into the White House with her favorite toys, treats and plenty of room to smell and explore." This is good news, especially as not all First Family pet news of the Biden Administration has been fully positive. And I am relieved to hear that Willow hasn't yet been eaten by Major.

So, now that I've completely given in to my desire to preach about the only inspiring headlines I've read this month, I have the difficult, and perhaps, impossible task of finding the golden thread that ties these silly stories to our lectionary texts for today. Perhaps no matter how deeply I dig there is no link. Perhaps the only connective tissue I can find is simply love – yet even that is tenuous. I love these animal stories because they bring me joy.... and in today's lesson we hear some of the most important words ever written on the topic of love.

Our first lesson today is from Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth. Were you surprised to hear this lesson outside of the context of a wedding? That is usually where one hears it. You may not realize that Paul didn't write 1 Corinthians 13 about romantic love between two people in marriage. While it certainly works well and gives life in that context, Paul wrote these words to address how life should be lived in Christian community – in the church. He is speaking of an entirely different love.

In ancient Greek, it is understood that there are four types of love: eros (or romantic love), philia (the love of friends and equals), storge (familial and instinctual love – as the love of a mother for her child), and agape (self-giving love – as the love of God for humankind – the love given with no expectation of return). While Paul's call to love-in-community applies to all types of love, his focus was not on eros.

What is known now as 1 Corinthians, was originally a letter written to the nascent Christian community Paul founded in Corinth. In it he was instructing them on how they were to live, support, pray, and love together. Paul describes the defining characteristics of community covenantal love – of agape, or self-giving love. It is the same love Jesus spoke of in the “new” commandment he gave his disciples on the night of his arrest. Jesus charged them to love one another in the same way that Jesus loved them. In this way, love-in-community is, by its very nature, cruciform shaped.

Paul tells the Corinthians, and us, exactly what that this love is like: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” This is the love with which God loves us. This is the love with which we are infused by the Holy Spirit when we allow Christ into our hearts and lives to live in us and through us. ***This is the love with which a community thrives.***

New Testament scholar Michael Gorman argues that perhaps the most significant statement that defines agape love in Paul’s treatise is that love “does not insist on its own way.” This love, which mirrors in human form the divine love, is not self-seeking – it does not extract from the other. Rather this love edifies – it builds up; adds to; and seeks the good of the other. Paul insists that we are all given spiritual gifts but, because we are bound to each other and into one body, what gifts we possess are nothing if not expressed through the lens of love.

Perhaps this is why Paul ends his treatise on love-in-community with this final declaration: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” For any action or decision – righteous or otherwise – is made better and more true when expressed through love. As Frederick Buechner writes, “The highest gift of all is *agape*... Without it even faith, almsgiving, [and] martyrdom are mere busyness and even great wisdom doesn't amount to a hill of beans.”

Lest we allow this passage to rest too comfortably in the land of schmaltzy platitudes, we need to recognize that Paul was writing to a community in real conflict. This was not written to be a pious reflection on the way things should be, but rather to call the Corinthians to account for their behavior. Everything he says love is not, they are; everything he says love is, they are not. This is provocative writing, that all but demanded the Corinthians take a look at the less than positive side of their community life. When aspect this is acknowledged, the text then moves from the realm of dreamy wistfulness to become a call to every Christian community to strive for a higher standard of how to be love-in-community.

None of us reach the heights of love that Paul describes. All of us have room to grow and stretch. After all this is a standard set by God and made real in Jesus. It is a call to action that may always be a bit out of our grasp, but is a worthy goal nonetheless because in doing so we will be transformed.

Throughout this letter, Paul calls the community in Corinth – and us – to unity through the holiness and humility of love. Moreover, Paul concludes his letter with this final charge and prayer: “Let all that you do be done in love.” Somedays (perhaps most days), this may feel like an unreasonably high bar to reach. However, with this call to love comes a promise of support. That the One who loves us with this perfect love not only commands us to love each other like this, but also promises to help us do that.

So, no there’s no intrinsic thread that connects the sweet and mildly interesting animal stories I related at the beginning of the sermon with Paul’s famous lesson on love-in-community. Perhaps the only connection I can find is joy. The animal stories brought me joy in a challenging time, and I believe that joy may be one of the most underestimated yet powerful of spiritual gifts. For the gift and experience of joy softens and opens our hardened hearts, making us more receptive to the love that does not insist on its own way.

Amen.