

**4 Epiphany C**

**January 31, 2016**

**Perhaps Love**

**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

In 1981, singer/songwriter John Denver and his wife Annie were separated and had decided to divorce. It was a painful time for both of them, their friends, and their families. Yet in the middle of what John later referred to as a turmoil, he began thinking about love, not, he said in his autobiography, that he felt particularly loved at that moment, or that he had a love in his life, but remembering love helped. As he thought about love images began pouring into his mind, and being a song writer, he wrote those images into the song called *Perhaps Love*. He put the song in an envelope and mailed it next day mail to Annie who read the words:

*Perhaps love is like a resting place, a shelter from the storm, it exists to give you comfort, it is there to keep you warm.....Perhaps love is like a window, perhaps an open door, it invites you to come closer, it wants to show you more....love to some is like a cloud, to some as strong as steel, for some a way of living, for some a way to feel, some say love is holding on, and some say letting go...perhaps love is like the ocean, full of conflict, full of pain, like a fire when its cold outside, thunder when it rains...*

These are just some of the words of John Denver's beautiful song. And to this day Annie says of all the songs John wrote, *Perhaps Love* is her favorite, even though they did go through with the divorce, and even though this song came out of a painful time for both her and John. So perhaps, moments of pain are moments that can potentially produce the most meaningful and beautiful things of all.

I often think of John's song when I read the section of Paul's letter to the Corinthians we just heard this morning. This portion of Scripture is one that is most likely to be chosen by couples to be read at their weddings, which is why it is often misunderstood to be a poem idealizing love. That is not the case at all. This section of Paul's letter was intended to name for the early church how Christians were to live in times of conflict. In other words, Paul's audience wasn't a couple starting a new life together, Paul was writing those words to church filled with conflict, disagreement, and division.

A church that sounds more like the crowd Jesus encountered in our Gospel. Make no mistake, this is indeed the exact same group we heard about last week that appeared to welcome Jesus so warmly back to his hometown synagogue when he read and preached about being the Messiah, the Anointed One. This week the people in the synagogue became so full of rage – an emotion much stronger than anger – they behaved like a lynch mob when they drove Jesus out of town and tried to kill him. What happened to the love? What happened to make such a drastic change in the hearts and minds of the people who knew and loved Jesus?

Scholars tell us that the most likely answer is that the members of the synagogue did not like what Jesus had to say, not about being the Messiah, they seemed to like that part a lot, but they did not like what he said about God's grace and love being given to foreigners and enemies. That is what those stories he mentioned are about: prophets who helped people who were not Israelites and even an enemy of Israel, as is the case with Naaman the Syrian. The people of Nazareth may not have wanted to share Jesus, or felt that because they knew him so well they should get the best he had to offer, that he should help himself before going out to help others, that being part of his hometown made them better or special. When Jesus said that was not the case, the people were enraged, because they were hurt, disappointed, insulted, jealous, and angry that Jesus was saying God's love is for everyone. They didn't want to lose their place of privilege, so they went from being welcoming and nurturing to enraged and violent.

I am sure the scholars are right in their conclusion. It certainly makes sense. But if we just leave it there, that doesn't mean much for us today; and conveniently keeps this story at a comfortable distance for us. Instead, I wonder what this story might have for those of us here today.

Like love. I'm still curious about what happened to love in this story. Did it simply go away when Jesus said the words people did not want to hear? Maybe not. Remember John Denver's song about love was written during a time when he felt absent from love, not in the midst of love. Yet the song, he claimed, came from the love he'd had all along, and his discovery was that love wasn't just a comforting feeling, love is about choices, and actions like holding on and letting go. It was during his painful divorce that John matured, and so did his concept and understanding of love. Perhaps the people in Jesus' hometown synagogue were holding on to something they loved: the Jesus they knew, and the belief that the

Messiah was going to be someone who would restore them to power. They loved that idea too much to let it go, and so they couldn't receive the love Jesus had for them. Jesus was proving to be different from who they thought he was, and that was painful for them.

It might be easy for us to judge the people in the synagogue, to roll our eyes and say they were selfish and maybe even close minded. But if we take a step back, we might see a similar kind of anger in our communities, churches, schools, businesses or families. Whenever there is the perception that there isn't enough to go around, there is fear and anger someone won't get what they deserve. Sometimes churches become paralyzed when they look at declining numbers in pews and budgets. The same can be true of schools or families whenever things happen that are contrary to what someone wanted, or hoped, or remembers from the past. Often those desires are not ill intentioned, they often come from love: wanting the best for a loved one, or hoping a loved one will care for them. That is the kind of love that wants to hold on: hold on to things the way someone thinks they should be, or the way someone remembers.

Perhaps Jesus was suddenly seen as a threat when he showed a different kind of love: the letting go kind. Where things like expectations and should bes and used to bes can be released. When that happens, that is when the kind of love Paul wrote about can be experienced; a way to face and grow through things like unexpected events, difficult news, conflict, challenges, and see them as new opportunities.

Perhaps Jesus wasn't attempting to deny his home synagogue God's love and grace as much as he was offering them the opportunity to live into God's love and grace, by reminding them as God's people they could show God's love and grace to the world, and that world was much wider and broader than they had come to think of it. Perhaps Jesus was trying to show the people in his home synagogue, as John Denver learned, love, especially God's love, is also deeper and wider and broader than they understood it.

We heard this opportunity was met with rage instead of curiosity, and violence instead of exploration. And we heard that wonderful line about Jesus passing through it all to go on his way. His way wasn't fighting back, it wasn't trying to force being right on anyone, he didn't express disappointment or anger or frustration; he kept going. Showing us a love that keeps going, that doesn't give up, that finds a way, a love that isn't stopped or diminished by difficulties, conflicts, or failures.

Perhaps there will be times when we as individuals or as a parish may face challenges, disappointments, and heartbreaks. Perhaps there will even be times when we find ourselves in situations where we have to give the news no one wants to hear. When we find ourselves in those moments, perhaps we can remember Jesus' experience in his hometown, and if we find ourselves moving toward anger, we might ask ourselves what we are holding on to. If we can let go, we might see, as John Denver saw, and as Paul encouraged all Christians is true, that being open to God's love and living in that love even if we don't feel loved, or when we find ourselves in a difficult time, we might find growth, opportunity, and see how God's love will provide a way through.