

HOW DEEP IS OUR LOVE?  
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The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany  
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It is very striking to me that during these last Sundays with you--Sundays of saying goodbye--Jesus is in his home synagogue challenging the community to remember to look outward, to look beyond itself. In order to look more deeply at this idea, let's start with our lesson from Jeremiah, along with our Psalm.

Both use language speaking of God's presence with the writers in their mothers' wombs. Jeremiah writes, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you" (Jer. 1:5) and the Psalmist sings, "I have been sustained by you ever since I was born; from my mother's womb you have been my strength." (Ps. 71:6a-b) I have always found this idea of God's involvement with us from the very beginning, or even before the very beginning, of our lives, deeply affecting. This time through the lectionary, I find myself reflecting right away on a simple fact: that God's knowledge and care for all human beings from their mothers' wombs is just as true today as it ever was. I think this is an important truth today because it is easy for us to be distracted from it.

There is a great deal of talk in the church today about living in post-Christian, and indeed post-religious, times. We in the church are now a remnant, the thinking goes. Our job is to continue to be faithful, but often the thinking goes that our focus belongs on the spiritual health of our own faith communities, rather than on growing those communities. I think this can have the entirely unintentional effect of creating an "us and them": those of us in the fold of God's children, and those who are not interested in the idea of God to begin with, and never will be. I have never heard it said out loud, but there can be a sense that God is therefore not really involved in these other peoples' lives.

This is simply not a biblical idea. It is equally true of every person that she or he was created and is loved by God. Awhile back I was in a pediatrician's office waiting room with my daughter and seated next to us was a mother and her 7-month-old baby boy. We were enchanted by him, which is the reaction most of us have to babies most of the time. It is not unlike the reaction we have to weddings: when wedding pictures are being taken in a park or a botanical garden, or when a bride and groom are coming down the steps of a church, what do we do? We want to get close and see! In just the same way, when we see a baby, we want to make eye contact with him or her, we want to connect. In both instances, we sense that God is close by in a special way. And this is essentially true of all babies and of all weddings. There is a wonderful story about one of the great Native American chiefs of the nineteenth century, who near the end of his life spent a great deal of his time playing with the children in his village. When asked why this was so, he said "because they have recently been where I am soon going to be." God is surely actively present and involved in the lives of all people, across our life spans, because he created each and every one of us. Babies and weddings are two windows into this truth that all of us can easily embrace.

But it is easy enough to forget. And it is understandable, with all the huge pressures and stresses of our lives, that we in the church might be content to focus on the people in our own communities. It is a biblical idea that God is known and loved and worshipped corporately. The big mistake is not that we find it easier to see God in the lives of the people we share our lives with. No, the big mistake is to think that the people outside our circles of family and church and community are any less important to God.

I think this is what our Gospel lesson is addressing. We actually heard the first part of the passage last week, when Jesus, in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth, read from the words of the prophet Isaiah announcing that “The spirit of the Lord is upon me.” (Luke 4:18a) The last words of last week’s Gospel are repeated as the first words of today’s: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (4:21b) At first, we hear, “All spoke well of him.” (4:22) He’s the hometown boy who’s made good, Joseph’s son. Everyone recognizes him and is pleased.

But Jesus tells them that he has not come to make them feel good about the fact that he is one of them. His reach is much wider. He gives several examples from Hebrew Scripture (actually from First and Second Kings) in which foreigners received help when Israel did not. (Luke 4:24-27 and NOAB notes, pp. 84-85 NT) The congregation responds with rage.

This story is sometimes incorrectly interpreted as a story of the xenophobia of the Jewish people, who are enraged because they want to keep the messianic benefits for themselves. But it is nothing of the kind. It is simply a story of one community that was enraged because it didn’t want to look beyond its own boundaries.

Jesus never left Judaism, and never withheld his saving grace from his people. But he did point his people out beyond the insularity that was sometimes present in local communities, to the Gentile world. He said, if you will, that God has loved Gentiles from their mothers’ wombs, too. They need to be grafted onto the vine of the religion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In our age, in which the Gentiles have been thoroughly grafted on and have become the institutional church, we in the church must ask ourselves, where are the “Gentiles” now? And the answer is precisely in the secular, post-religious, post-Christian society that surrounds us. This is where Jesus would turn his attention today. And as followers of Jesus, it is where we are called to turn ours.

“Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor. 13:13) So, Paul reminds us in his immortal words in his First Letter to the Corinthians. It is, of course, love that gives us grace to turn our attention where Jesus would. It is love that lets us see a child of God in each new life, each young life, each middle-aged life, each senior life, whether God is any part of those lives or not. Those who want no part of God are loved by God just the same, and it is our vocation as the church to push past our boundaries and love them too. Let us indeed be strong in the wonderful community we have here in this wonderful place we now call Grace. And let us, in faith and hope, extend the love we experience so clearly here out to a world that has never needed it more.