

EPIPHANY: IN FAITH WE PROCLAIM GOD'S LOVE FOR ALL PEOPLE

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

January 28, 2007

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalms 71:1-6

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-30

What's Love Got To Do with Confrontation?

There are times when the selection of lectionary readings seems to defy logic. Texts of comfort are paired with texts of terror; texts of warning are paired with texts of blessings. Yet, even such unnatural pairings reflect the beautiful complexity of the Bible. Just as our lives and our faith are complex—and sometimes complicated—layers of belief and action, so it is with the biblical text.

The selection of readings for this week might appear illogical at first. From the Hebrew Bible we read the call of Jeremiah, a prophet of Israel active from about 625 B.C. to 568 B.C. Jeremiah is specially appointed to deliver God's message to the people of Israel. But this message is anything but positive and comforting. The LORD chose Jeremiah to warn the people about punishment and impending disaster if they refuse to be faithful to their God (Jeremiah 1:9-10). Jeremiah's call here in the first chapter is only a hint at the difficulties he must endure as one of God's prophets.

From the Gospels, we read about a confrontation Jesus had with people who probably knew him best—those “neighbors” from his hometown of Nazareth. After reading Scripture in the synagogue as was the custom, Jesus spoke openly about what God had called him to say and to do. Explaining that his message was not only for those who like him, Jesus warned that these familiar faces might not even listen to what God wanted them to learn! His lesson angered these people to the point that they wanted to throw him off a cliff! (Luke 4:28-30)

The surprise comes in the third reading: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13. This chapter in 1 Corinthians contains some of the best-loved words in the New Testament. This “Love Chapter” describes a love that can withstand tough times, grumpiness, jealousy, and even wrongdoing. But can love see us through confrontations like those that Jeremiah and Jesus had to face when going about their appointed tasks?

It is doubtful that many of us will face the persecution that Jeremiah faced in his life as a prophet, or be threatened with being pushed off a cliff by neighbors and acquaintances! But our lives—no matter how much we love God, praise God, worship God, and live right for God—will meet with confrontations that can be very difficult! At those times we may see no way out, and feel as if these burdens are impossible to bear.

So what does love have to do with the confrontations in our lives? The lesson from the apostle Paul is strikingly simple: confrontations, difficulties, threats, tough times will end, but the love we receive and learn from God will never end (1 Corinthians 13:8). This love will endure, strengthen, support, and comfort us in the midst of our complex and complicated lives.

Let the selection of lectionary readings for today challenge us to remember that we are not alone. God reminded Jeremiah that even though his job as a prophet would be filled with confrontation, God would be there with him: “Do not be afraid of [the people], for I am with you to deliver you” (Jeremiah 1:8, *NRSV*). So let us not fear the difficulties and confrontations that will come our way; God’s amazing love has a remarkable way of seeing us through.

This week’s Reflection was prepared by Steve Berneking, Ph.D., who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Translations Manager in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

+ + +

This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: **Guinea** – With thanks to God for the expansion of Bible work and that the Bible will be launched in Kpele, the first Bible in a local language, and with prayers that it will have an impact on the speakers of this language; **Sierra Leone** – With thanks to God for the expansion of the *Faith Comes By Hearing* program and for good progress with translation projects and for the improved response to the HIV/AIDS awareness materials, and with prayers that peace and stability will reign in that country; **Liberia** – With thanks to God for democratic elections and emerging political stability, and with prayers that the international community will contribute to improving the road network so that distribution activities can be expanded in order to reach Christians in rural communities; **Mali** – With thanks for God’s blessings and with prayers for God’s guidance in meeting the Scripture needs of specific audiences such as the visually impaired and those affected by HIV/AIDS, and with prayers for the acquisition of land for a new Bible House and for the strengthening of literacy and *Faith Comes by Hearing* programs.

Activity Corner: “Gifts of Love” Hearts

Supplies needed: Bible; red 8-1/2” x 11” construction paper; scissors; pens or pencils.

Read together 1 Corinthians 13:1-13. Invite everyone in your household to cut out a heart (fold the construction paper in half length-wise and cut from the fold to the bottom of the paper) and to copy 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 on one side of the heart, but replacing the words “Love is” and “love/it does not” with “I am” and “I do not.” Encourage everyone to think of something helpful they could do for someone else, write it on the reverse side of the heart, and present their heart with the stated “gift” of kindness to the intended recipient.