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“Love at the Epicenter”

**A sermon by
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**Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Jer. 4:1–10, 22–24; Lam. 3:21–26; 1 Cor. 13:1–13; Lk. 4: 21–30;

I have not been to Haiti recently, but I have been to Haiti before.
And I have been to Haiti recently enough to imagine the suffering there
that has resulted from the earthquake and aftershocks since January 12.
I was working with Haitian plantation laborers in 1998
following a close brush with Hurricane Mitch,
which wheeled disastrously nearby with sustained winds of 180 mph.
And I remember the children gesticulating wildly
as they acted out the great wind,
that bent trees to the ground and sent debris flying through the air.
They would roar and wail, their arms and hands flailing furiously
above their heads;
crashing fist to palm to imitate the crashing and smacking of
falling tree to house;
slashing and chopping with the side of their palm to arm or
leg or neck to indicate the impact of flying corrugated metal
as it breaks loose and flies into feeble flesh.
By their galvanized dance of shaking and trembling limbs, and by their
high pitched squeal and song of terror and lament, I could only imagine
the frightening horror of their encounter with the storm.

But they had no dance, no song for the power of love in its aftermath.
That, I had to find for myself.

Would it come through lengthy orations about the economic
redevelopment of third world countries, or would
that only jar the ear, like gong and cymbal?

Would it come through well-meaning missionaries,
overly eager to use this tragedy
as an opportunity to spread the gospel
to these voodoo-infested corners of the world,
or would that only serve others' agendas?

Would it come through boatloads of shipping crates,
overflowing with bright sleeves, collars and ruffles of used clothing;
the shirts off the backs of wealthy Americans who need
to make more room in their own closets,
or would that only seem like playing dress-up with broken dolls?

Those are the kinds of questions that Paul is asking
as he pens his letter to the church at Corinth, leading with three
rhetorical questions.

Which of these is ultimately most helpful?

Lip-service? Over-zealousness? Hand-me-down generosity?
Or some other, more-appropriate manifestations of God's love?

What does love look like after a tragedy like an earthquake?

What does love look like after a tragedy that kills up to 300,000 people?

What does love look like after a tragedy that involves frail flesh
and the death of innocents?

I have not been to Haiti recently, but I have been
to Duke's Emergency Room lately, to sit with
a friend who had an unexpected encounter with unhealth.

It was the week after New Years; the coldest week of the winter;

a week after the two full moons of December.
And if you know anything about Emergency Room medicine,
you know that full moons draw patients in like a magnet;
double-full moons like a powerful electromagnet.
Those who had put off seeing a doctor over the holidays,
were out in force, coughing, wheezing, ruddy with fever,
shivering, bandaged, splinted,
accompanied by family members and friends.
The Emergency Waiting Room was packed to the brim; not a seat vacant.
The hospital upstairs was fully occupied; the halls of the ER
lined with patients on gurneys waiting to be admitted.
"Nineteen", the staff announced, were awaiting admission.
So, no matter how close you got to the ER door, you were always
nineteen deep in the process before you ever started.
And "wait" seemed to be the operative word for the day.
"Wait" here, please. "Wait" to see triage. "Wait for the doctor to come in.
"Wait" for your x-rays. "Wait" for the results of your lab tests.
"Wait" for a diagnosis. "Wait" to be admitted.
"Wait" for your discharge orders.
I could have described the scene as total chaos;
as something like a perfect storm of sickness;
as the front-line of germ warfare.
But it wasn't.
For the power of love was palpable there, in small quiet places,
bringing calm to the chaos.
An elderly African American man sat slouching in a hospital wheelchair,
twirling the gold wedding band on his fourth finger nervously,
his two daughters flanking him on either side.
They would squat down, head-to-head,
make eye contact and pat his nervous hands tenderly as they spoke,

to ask him if he needed a drink, or something to read while he waited,
to adjust his blanket, and then to buss him on the cheek as they
came and went on his behalf.

It was so tender, so touching, literally, to see this stooping and bending
of the health to need, to bring the sick to a place of restoration.

The posture of love was so reverential, so powerful in its tenderness.

And I couldn't help but think of the postures of love surrounding Jesus:

the woman who kneels to anoint his feet with precious oil, and to wipe
them with her hair;

the friends who bend and strain to lower a sick man gingerly
on his pallet through a make-shift skylight,

so that Jesus might touch and heal him;

the bending of Jesus to Simon Peter's mother-in-law,

to rebuke the high fever which had caused her to suffer;

the curve of Jesus back as he pours water into a basin,
and stoops to wash 12 pairs of feet,

his hair own falling foot-ward from the exertion.

No matter where you are, it seems, the posture of love

is a straight line acquiescing to a curve, to a stooping, to a bending,
to a lowering towards need,

to touch, heal, wash, anoint and serve.

Paul wants the church at Corinth to be that laboratory

where that curve of love is practiced locally.

Paul wants the church at Corinth to be the experimental site

where love's bending to want and need is tested and tried.

So, after asking his three rhetorical questions about love,

Paul defines what agape love is, and what it is not,

knowing that the truth lies somewhere between the two.

Love is patient, kind, unselfish, affirming of the good,

unbelievably believing, sturdy, hopeful, and enduring.

On the other hand, love is not envious, not prone to braggadocio, not conceited,
not ill-mannered, not my-way-or-the-highway, not irritable,
not in the least humored by others' misfortune.

Paul uses the Greek word *agape* for the kind of love he's describing.

Agape love is not affection. It is not friendship, or brotherly love.

Nor is it physical love based upon sexual attraction,

although those are all natural manifestations of love which
are, in and of themselves, good.

Agape love is the extraordinary, supernatural energy

of what C.S. Lewis calls Divine Gift-love,

where the very nature of *God-is-love* is shared with and imparted upon humanity

that we might exceed beyond natural manifestations

to love what is not naturally loveable:

"lepers, criminals, enemies, the sulky, the superior, the
sneering", as CS Lewis puts it.

Agape love is imparted/gifted from God to humanity, allowing us

not only to love what is not naturally loveable,

but allowing the nature of our love to be wholly void of self-interest,

and wholly desiring of what is simply best for the beloved.

(CS Lewis. *The Four Loves*. "Charity", p. 282)

I ran into a poem this week about an earthquake,

that speaks a little of this idea agape love

that exceeds natural manifestations,

and loves, for the best of the beloved, those labeled unloveable.

It's by J. Gwyn Griffiths, and it's called:

There Are Limits to Brotherly Love

There are limits to brotherly love, as I have observed more than once.

There was an earthquake in eastern Turkey
with an entire village scattered into the desolate hill-country
and thousands buried under the rock and rubble with no hope of escape.

Help came, to be fair, from all points of the compass
and planes, flew in, laden down
with food and clothing and medicines to help the wretched survivors
and get the weak back on their feet.

Yet there, on the ground, there was a curious bottleneck
with the Turkish Government slow to act
where the world had been quick.

At last the reason emerged:
these victims weren't Turks,
but Kurds
and Kurds to the Government
were Nationalists and Separatists,
Freedom fanatics,
accursed extremists.
Hellfire,
they didn't deserve to be helped!

Jesus, in your limitless and overflowing love,
take pity on humankind.
Make another earthquake happen
and raze to the ground
the mountain that spits flames of prejudice and oppression,
the Vesuvius in the heart of humanity.

Maybe Haiti is our Vesuvius, our chance to practice agape love
that mirrors Jesus' extraordinary and supernatural agape love:
limitless and overflowing,
curving, bending, stooping, lowering oneself towards need,
regardless of the nature of the needy,
regardless of the distance to the need.

There is a saying from the Hasidic tradition of Judaism
claiming that a truly righteous person
should feel the pain of a woman in labor fifty miles away.

This is quite a claim from a male-dominated tradition: to be fully alive as to be
so aware of someone different from yourself that you can feel
a pain that you cannot possibly experience physically yourself.

(from Mordecai of Neskhizh, in Gary Commins, *Becoming Bridges*, p. 8)

Perhaps it is akin to experiencing the pain in the ER locally,
and then to imagine the pain and suffering of the people of Haiti,
sitting in make-shift tents and lean-to housing
waiting, waiting, waiting, past nineteen, twenty, twenty-one,
two-thousand and one,
just to be seen by someone who bends to bandage their brokenness.

*Another story is told of the 13th century Sufi poet and mystic, Rumi,
that one of his disciples was alarmed one day when his teacher,
supposedly an ascetic, asked him to bring his master a large dish
of rich food.*

*The suspicious disciple followed Rumi as he carried the food
through the streets, into the fields and finally into the ruins of a tomb.*

*There the disciple saw Rumi bending over to feed by hand
an exhausted mother dog and her six puppies.*

*In awe, the disciple, giving himself away, asked,
"How did you know they were here? How did you know they were hungry?"
Rumi answered, "The one who is fully awake can hear*

the cry of a sparrow from ten thousand miles away."

(Gary Commins, *Becoming Bread*, p. 106)

What love is here, I think Paul would say, love should be there.

There are no barriers to love. There are no oceans to cross.

There are only crosses to bear.

Love bends as far as it must to meet need,

to touch, heal, wash anoint, and serve.

It's the kind of gift-love that drove Elijah over the edge

to Sidon help a widow in Zarephath.

It's the kind of love that compelled Elisha to

send his curing vibes to heal a leper in Syria.

It's the kind of love that almost got Jesus thrown over the edge of a cliff.

It's the kind of love that can get you in big trouble.

The proud and straight acquiesce to the curve of service.

That is God's divine Gift-love in action.

And what about the future of love?

If we look back from the end of time, Paul says, things will look different.

If we think eschatologically, imagining ourselves in the post-resurrection

kingdom when God's reign is finally and fully realized,

then we shall notice the thin profit yielded from most

of our precious and costly investments.

Knowledge, in which we invest so much time and energy,

and which we work so hard to acquire over a lifetime,

will always be limited.

Tongues and languages, which we acquire to speak of what we know,

to express our limited knowledge, will cease.

But agape love, the divine Gift-love that is not acquired,

but rather is reflected and given away,

is the one thing that will last forever.
For at the end of time, Paul says, faith and hope will cease,
because things believed in and hoped for will actually happen.
But love will abide, because love is the greatest of God's gifts,
because love is the essence of God's self,
made visible for us in Jesus Christ,
because love is at the epicenter of whom we are as Church,
because the Church has been created to be love's mirror,
because God's love has unshakeable grasp upon our lives,
and because God's love has an unshakeable commission upon our lives
though the earth give way,
and the mountains quake and fall into the heart of the sea.
May we bend the cross, for Christ's sake,
in order that love's tender touch reach where needed. Amen.

Benediction: I want to leave us with a poem by Wendell Berry, called:

Like Snow

Suppose we did our work like the snow, quietly, quietly, leaving nothing out.