

“What They Don't Want to Hear”
Luke 4:21-30, I Corinthians 13
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I think I estimated once that I've done around 300 weddings in the years that I've been an ordained minister. And I think at least half of those weddings I've read that passage from I Corinthians 13 about love. So I had Joyce read it today. But it's a great passage, isn't it? No wonder people want it read at their weddings. Love is patient and kind. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Great words for a wedding. But of course that passage has nothing at all to do with marriage. It doesn't even have anything to do with love between couples. It's all about how people should treat each other in church. Paul writes these words to a church that was having problems. The church in Corinth was one that Paul had founded and had close ties to. But after he left them they had a multitude of problems. There seems to have been a jockeying for power of rival groups in the church, a certain indifference to some pretty flagrant immorality, treating the poor in the congregation like second class members, and especially some people who believed that because they had particular “gifts” that they were more important than the other members. You may remember from last week when Laura read from chapter 12 about how we are all part of the body of Christ and no one more important than another. But concluding that Paul tells them that they should strive for the higher gifts—those gifts that build up a congregation. But then he tells them that he will show them a still more excellent way—that's when he speaks about love. It would be typical for this letter to be read to the church when they gathered on a Sunday, so of course when the people heard Paul's words about love, they all said, “Ohhhh, how sweet,” and turned to their enemies and everyone embraced, right? Not right. Paul told them exactly what they didn't want to hear. Because he didn't speak about how we should feel toward each other, he spoke about how if we are going to be followers of Jesus Christ, how we must treat each other—imperfectly, yes, but this is our responsibility as disciples.. Not what they wanted to hear.

And it may not really be what couples looking to get married want to hear either, if they really think about it. Because this is not a passage about how wonderful the emotions of love are. It is a challenge to act with love in spite of one's feelings. Remember what the passage says, "Love is patient." Are we always patient with those that we say we love? But that's what we are encouraged to do, to be patient, to be kind. To not be envious or arrogant or rude. To not insist on our own way, but to seek what is best for the one we love. To rejoice in the truth—even when it hurts. This isn't about flowers and valentines and sweet poetry. It's actually a description of how Jesus acted toward us, it is a description of how God acts toward his creation—patiently, kindly, seeking what is best for us at all times, even when the things we do must disappoint him, or anger him, or sadden him—he still believes in us, hopes for us, and will wait forever for us. It's not easy, the way of love is never easy—that's not only what we tell couples when they marry, but it is what we should tell people when they become part of the church. But so often we don't say that, because we tell people what they want to hear.

That's what got Jesus into trouble in Nazareth also. If you remember, when we left Jesus he had gone home to Nazareth and stood up to teach in the synagogue. He has already gotten a reputation as a healer and teacher and miracle worker in the surrounding towns. But this is Nazareth, this is where he grew up. They knew him from way back when. To them he was "Joseph's son," they knew his brothers and sisters, he was nobody special. So when he stands up to teach, it's nice, it's cute, great to see local boy has done well.

Have you ever gone to a high school reunion? Some of you grew up around here and probably go to them every 5 years or so. I've only been to one of mine, the 10 year. You don't expect a lot of things to change in ten years, and I guess they really hadn't for most people. But it was interesting going and seeing people. And I suppose it was interesting for them to see me, too. It was at that reunion that a young woman came up to me and greeted me warmly as we all did with one another. This was a girl that I had gone to school with since 4th grade, ridden on the same mountain bus with her twice a day for years, but who I hadn't seen since graduation day. She came up to me and said, "Mark, how are you? I

said, “Wonderful Debbie, how are you?” and we talked for a few minutes and of course she said, “So what are you doing now?” And I said, “Well, I'm the pastor of a Presbyterian church.” Total silence. And then she started to chuckle. And then she started to laugh, but stopped herself-- “Seriously? *You're* a minister?” I said that I was, and Debbie just burst into laughter, and she laughed and laughed. I'm glad I made someone's day. Not in your hometown—I knew what Jesus meant.

When he goes home, it is hard for them to listen to him because to them he was still some kid who had grown up there among them. Especially when they expect him to do some of the healing and miracles that he has become so famous for. But he doesn't do anything like that, because they just want to see the show, it isn't a matter of faith. It isn't something they need. They don't come to him with someone who is sick, they just want him to demonstrate his power, so they can say, “See, he came from here!” When he refuses, they begin to get angry. He doesn't do what they want, and what's more he begins to tell them exactly what they don't want to hear. They want to hear how special they are, how important they have been to him. Nazareth after all is a small, unimportant agricultural village of maybe 500 people. But instead of telling them what they want to hear and showing them some miracles, Jesus reminds them that God is not just their God but the God of all. That he is not sent from God to perform for them, but to bring the good news to all people. They are special, but only as all people are special to God. It makes them so angry, the scripture says they were filled with rage, and are going to throw him over the cliff. All because he didn't tell them what they wanted to hear.

But that's not his job, is it? It wasn't Paul's job either. If love really rejoices in the truth, then it is the job of love to tell the truth—patiently, kindly, but the truth nonetheless, not just what we want to hear. And that's not my job either. In different committees of the church and at session meetings we have discussed what will attract more people to our church. In a way we are talking about “marketing” the church. We are trying to make the church more visible, trying to be out there in the community with our mission efforts, trying to be obvious about being welcoming to all people. All these are great things, but sometimes I get tempted to structure a sermon so that it will sound good, so that it will be

accepted by everyone, to make you all feel good. And I think that most times you should leave here feeling good: you should always hear the good news of God's love for us, you should always have the experience of the love of God's people for each one of you. I hope that makes you feel good. But it is not my job to preach what you want to hear, it is my job to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that good news of Jesus comes with challenges—the challenge to be a faithful disciple, to be loving and forgiving even when we don't want to, to be caring for God's creation even when looking the other way would be easier, to care for the “least of these” because we see Jesus among the poor and the hungry and the sick and the imprisoned and the homeless. And we should be hearing the challenge to love—to love no matter what. No matter how we feel. No matter what the circumstances. To love no matter what, because that's the way God loves us.