

IV Epiphany C 2022 (January 30)

Prelude (“Lágrimas” by Francisco Tárrega)

Welcome to our service for January 30, 2022, the Fourth Sunday After Epiphany. I’m Pastor Curtis Aguirre. Bob Park is the musician.

Let’s sing the hymn, “Praise, My Soul, the God of Heaven,” #864 in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship books.

1. Praise, my soul, the God of heaven, joyfully your tribute bring.
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, evermore God’s praises sing.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Praises everlasting ring!
2. God be praised for grace and favour to our forebears in distress.
God be praised the same forever, slow to chide and swift to bless.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Glorious is God’s faithfulness!
3. Frail as summer’s flow’r we flourish, blows the wind and it is gone;
but as mortals rise and perish, God endures unchanging on.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise the great Eternal One!
4. Angels sing in adoration, in God’s presence, face to face.
Sun and moon and all creation, all who dwell in time and space.
Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise with us the God of grace!

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all... And also with you.

Let us pray.

Holy God, you confound the world’s wisdom in giving your kingdom to the lowly and the pure in heart. Give us such a hunger and thirst for justice, and perseverance in striving for peace, that in our words and deeds the world may see the life of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

Amen.

(Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 23)

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The lesson for today is I Corinthians 13:1-13

St. Paul writes:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Holy word, holy wisdom... Thanks be to God!

Sermon

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The love that the New Testament talks about is not an emotion, but emotions can be associated with it. The love that the New Testament talks about is an attitude, a stance of the mind and of the heart toward other people and toward God.

By contrast, the love we talk about in our everyday conversations, the love that is promoted and exploited in advertising and entertainment, in art and literature is a love of having, of getting, of grasping to ourselves; it is a love that wants to satisfy personal needs and desires.

For the purposes of this sermon, I will call this love “ordinary love”, because it is a natural outgrowth of our biology. It is part of what we need for survival. So, I'm going to make a pun on the word “*ordinary*” and say that ordinary love is part of the “order or survival”.

The love that the New Testament talks about is the inner stance that serves the other, both people and God. It is a love of letting go, of giving, of seeking the will of God. For the purposes of this sermon, I will call this love “extraordinary love” (as in, “extra-ordinary” or “outside of the ordinary”) because it comes from outside of us, from the realm of the Spirit, and it invades the order of survival to transform it and redeem it. It is “extra-ordinary” in that it is from outside of the order of survival. It is part of the “order of the Spirit”.

Ordinary love is not evil. It's just ordinary. Ordinary love is part of the set of instincts that God gave us as the biological creatures that we are to survive on planet earth. Ordinary love makes sure that we as a species live in a social fabric, have children, rear them, and protect our own against danger.

Sometimes ordinary love can lead to amazing acts of self-sacrifice, as when a parent endangers his or her own life to protect the life of a child. But sometimes ordinary love can also lead to terrible acts of retaliation, as when one person avenges the murder of a loved one by killing the perpetrator.

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Ordinary love has produced beautiful works of art inspired by its romantic side: paintings, sculptures, poems, songs. But ordinary love quickly turns to resentment and retaliation when it is spurned. How often has the feeling of being “in love” with someone become the feeling of bitter animosity toward that self-same person because they did not live up to our expectations, or because they betrayed our trust, or because they walked out on us? This is because, as I said, ordinary love is a love of having, of getting, of grasping and clinging; it is a love of satisfying personal needs and desires, and when those needs and desires are not satisfied, we get grumpy or even vengeful.

Extraordinary love does not come naturally. It is not a love that is part of our instinctual system. To use traditional imagery, it is the love from above. It is the love that comes down from heaven. To use the imagery I prefer, it is the love that crosses over from the spiritual realm into the physical realm.

Because it is not part of our natural make up, the logic of extraordinary love is contrary to the logic of our survival instincts. When Jesus says things like,

...if anyone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go the second mile...
(Matthew 5:39b-41)

...when we hear this, we are often—and quite naturally—jarred by the seeming illogic of this idea. It goes against everything that our survival instincts tell us. Our survival instincts tell us that when we are struck, we should defend ourselves; when we are sued, we should defend ourselves; when we are forced to do something onerous and against our will, we should resist.

Behold the world: turn on the news and see how the dark side of ordinary love looks. Jilted lovers and estranged spouses kill their ex's, and sometimes themselves. The members of one tribe or religion or nation bring death and destruction on another in the name of defending

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themselves and their loved ones. For the sake of improving our lives and the lives of our families, because we benefit from it, we have given tacit assent to a global system that diverts the earth's resources to a few with the result that most of the nearly 8 billion people on the planet live a hard and marginal life.

How can we redeem ordinary love run amok?

Jesus brings extraordinary love into our world; love not based on having, or getting, or preserving, or defending. As I said, extraordinary love is a love of letting go, of giving, of seeking the will of God. And again, as I said, this extraordinary love does not come naturally. It does not come from within us, but crosses to us, invades us from the order of the Spirit.

In today's reading from I Corinthians, Paul tries to describe this extraordinary love for his readers. Just before today's section begins, he writes:

Strive for the higher gifts, and I will show you a still more excellent way. (I Corinthians 12:31)

The way of extraordinary love stands far above even the most exalted gifts we have. Picking up on Paul's words, it is more exalted than any language we can speak, whether earthly or heavenly; it is more exalted than any spiritual power we may possess or any knowledge we could have. It is even more exalted than faith itself.

Paul says that this extraordinary love "never ends" and that it is "perfect". In other words, it is eternal, and it is complete, not lacking anything. It needs nothing more to complement it.

What Paul expresses in this way, John, in his first letter, puts this way:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (I John 4:16b)

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Here John reveals to us a mystery of God: that God is love. When this extraordinary love lives in us, God lives in us, and we live in God. In extraordinary love, the divide between the spiritual plane and the physical plane is finally bridged.

Let me reiterate what I said earlier: this extraordinary love is not a feeling, although feelings can come to be associated with it. This extraordinary love is an attitude of the mind and the heart toward God and others. This love is not natural to our species, nor to any species for that matter. It comes from the realm of the Spirit; more precisely, it comes from God, because it is the essence of who God is.

This extraordinary love is the redemption of the world from the excesses of our instincts—instincts that drive us to protect the things that command our loyalty or command our ordinary love, and in the process of protecting those special things we logically bring harm to those things or people who seem to threaten the thing we hold dear.

Only extraordinary love can undo the tangle of hatred and revenge done in the name of ordinary love; a tangle in which so many parts of our world have become stuck. For the love of my country and my people, I attack your country and your people; for the strategic advantage of me and mine, I cause chaos for you and yours.

What drives the conflicts in places like Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Ukraine or anywhere else where force and killing are seen by some as useful tools in their struggle for what they see as a good cause? What drives it? Having and not having, wanting and not getting, love of a cause or a group or a place and hatred of all that threatens it. Only God's extraordinary love can redeem this.

When Jesus neared Jerusalem, he wept at the sight of the city and said:

If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you... They will crush you to the

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ground, you and your children within you... because you did not recognize your visitation from God. (Luke 19:42-44)

The people of Jerusalem sought their salvation in a political and military leader who would free them from the power of Rome. By contrast, Jesus brought the way of turning the other cheek, giving up one's goods, carrying the load an extra mile—a direct reference to what Roman soldiers, by rights, could make people do: carry their packs for a mile. Jesus said, carry it for two miles.

Jesus brought the way of loving one's enemies and praying for those who persecute. Jesus brought the way of God's extraordinary love.

But the people of Jerusalem would have none of it. They killed the messenger of this way, and, as Jesus had predicted, the ultimate end of the whole matter was an armed rebellion by people who had had enough of Rome's heavy-handedness. The rebellion in turn was crushed by Rome's heavy hand, and all who weren't dead, were worse off than before.

Today, the story continues in many places of the world, and the outcome will always be the same—unless people embrace the way of God, the way of extraordinary love.

And the same is true closer to home, in our families, in our communities, and even here in the church. Maybe we don't generally resort to physical violence, but we still play out our conflicts by opposing or defending or bullying or manipulating in order to get or to have or to preserve.

Ordinary love tries to hide or mask wrongs, tries to rationalize them away as necessary evils. As we often say about ordinary love, "love is blind"; or, we could modify this to say, "ordinary love blinds us". Ordinary love tricks us into defending wrongs or protecting others or ourselves through secrets or through assigning blame. We also say, "all's fair in love and war." Ordinary love can even be cruel.

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Extraordinary love is shockingly honest. It is the embodiment of God's light in our lives. It knows no secrets because it shines light into all the dark places within ourselves. When we are filled, when we are invaded by extraordinary love, all the skeletons in our closets come out, all the silences are broken, we are freed from our emotional prisons.

How can this be?

Because those who do harm—abusers, exploiters, manipulators, passive-aggressives, well-meaning but misguided people, and so on—none of these is helped or served by being protected. Their salvation, our salvation—which is to say, their or our transformation—can only begin when we come out of the shadows and into the light. As Jesus said:

...all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may clearly be seen that their deeds have been done in God. (John 3:20-21)

Extraordinary love is a love of letting go, of giving, of seeking the will of God. The will of God does not become entangled in manipulation, in family secrets, in power politics, or in final solutions. The will of God is life, abundant life for all.

But the will of God also means death: death to lies and falsehoods, death to pretence, death to blame, death to everything that says that one person is more valuable than another.

Extraordinary love comes only from God. It is a way of being that does not come naturally. I have glimpsed it in fleeting moments in the extraordinary acts of others, and maybe I have even been privileged to operate occasionally, briefly under its influence. But I know that I fall woefully short. And so, I use Paul's words as a prayer for myself and for the world:

Yes, God, help us to strive for the greater gifts; but more importantly, show us your still more excellent way.

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Amen.

Let's sing the hymn, "Let Justice Flow Like Streams," #717 in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship books.

- 1. Let justice flow like streams of sparkling water pure,
enabling growth, refreshing life, abundant, cleansing, pure.**
- 2. Let righteousness roll on as others' cares we heed,
an ever-flowing stream of faith translated into deed.**
- 3. So may god's plumbline, straight, define our measure true,
and justice, right, and peace pervade this world our whole life through.**

Let us confess our faith using the words of the Apostle's Creed.

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead**

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

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the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray for all people according to their needs. I will end each petition with the words, "Lord, in your mercy," Please respond by saying, "Hear our prayer."

(Brief silence)

Holy God, infuse your Church with a spirit of justice, that it may be a prophetic voice for the voiceless, a bold witness of love to the neighbour, and a force for hope in all the world. Lord, in your mercy... Hear our prayer.

Holy God, fill us with awe before your created world, that we may be respectful stewards of all your creatures and the lands and water they inhabit. Give us the courage to make the choices necessary to preserve the life of this world. Lord, in your mercy... Hear our prayer.

Holy God, stir the leaders of all the nations to compassionate and just decisions. Guide them to rejoice in the truth that all people are beloved by you. Lord, in your mercy... Hear our prayer.

Holy God, guide this congregation as we enter into the call process to find a new pastor. Be with Pastor Curtis and his family as he enters retirement. Guide the Council and Bishop Kathy as they begin the work of discernment for the future. Lord, in your mercy... Hear our prayer.

God of healing, we offer our prayers for all who are ill or suffering in any way, and name them before you in our hearts and aloud...

(Long silence)

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For all these, Lord, in your mercy... Hear our prayer.

We give thanks for the faithful departed who have borne witness to you and who have come to know their fulfilment in you. Assure us of the hope that we will be joined to all the faithful in eternal light. Lord, in your mercy... Hear our prayer.

Into your hands, gracious God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in the gift of your Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray...

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever.
Amen.**

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord's face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favour (+) and give you peace. Amen.

Postlude ("Pavanas" by Gaspar Sanz)