

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY

January 31, 2010

Psalm 71:1-6; I Corinthians 13:1-13

The Dim Mirror

In honor of the end of January and the beginning of February, I would like to share with you some insights on New Englanders that come from Jeff Foxworthy via my sister who lives at the lower end of New England, Rhode Island.

“If you have switched from heat to A/C and back again in the same day, you live in New England.” (That almost happened last week.)

“If you design your kid’s Halloween costume to fit over a snowsuit, you live in New England.”

“If driving is better in the winter because the potholes are filled with snow, you live in New England.” (I have often thought so.)

“If you find 10 degrees a little chilly, you live in New England.”

“If you know all 4 seasons: almost winter, winter, still winter and road construction, you live in New England.”

And finally: “If someone in a Home Depot Store offers you assistance and they don’t work there, you live in New England.”

Today’s New Testament Lesson from First Corinthians is so familiar that most of us can recite parts of it by memory. I can’t tell you how many times a couple ask for that as a reading in their Wedding Service. And when a beloved individual dies, family and, indeed, ministers can think of no better expression of that life of that individual than the words of Paul.

That final New England quote is a down to earth expression of Paul’s meaning of love. Paul’s hope for his struggling Corinthian Church was that they would not only believe in the power of love but act out that love as a way of solidifying their bonds of

Christian Community and reaching out to the neighbors beyond their circle. I am illiterate when it comes to tools, nuts, bolts, nails and replacement parts for anything. When I gather my courage and enter the doors of Home Depot or Lowes or even the Aubuchons down the road, I am overwhelmed and fall into a dazed state. Because I am not exactly sure what I am looking for and can only describe ‘the thingy that connects to the do-hickey in the whatchamacallit,’ I am voiceless. As I stand, eyed glazed and mouth open in front of the area where I think what I think I need might be hiding, it is not uncommon for some fellow shopper to take pity on me and point me in the right direction. That’s what Paul is talking about, caring in very simple ways for others.

I have seen that caring individually within this church family. In addition to the outpouring of support for Haiti, folks respond when there is need in our church family. Rides are offered. Casseroles appear on door steps. Calls and visits are made. And I have appreciated the work of so many of you who give time, energy and creativity to meet the needs of our neighbors. In addition to the wonderful work of Poss Shop and JUMP folks, we are blessed by those volunteers, many of them young people, who make meals for Dismas and sandwiches for Small Potatoes. I have appreciated the willingness of people to deliver Meals on Wheels, to serve sandwiches for Small Potatoes or take the time to assist refugees in many ways. And I have seen the friendships that have grown out of those experiences.

Through their work we all begin to understand that love is not just words. Love is active caring. It means putting oneself out. It means taking time away from homework or other activities to come prepare food. It means getting up early on a cold Saturday morning so that others may have some of that prepared food. It means taking time in the

middle of a busy day to provide not only food but also a visible presence to another human being. Love is not only gentle and kind, it is disturbing of comfort and stretching of patience. It is the willingness to be bothered and to smile at the bother.

Thus, those heartfelt words of Paul are not only inspiring and poetic; they are demanding. They demand acceptance of complaint. They demand acceptance of lack of gratitude. They demand acceptance of the reality of human inconsistencies and empathy for those who are caught up in the inconsistent human systems that provoke pain and suffering. Love absolutely is all those descriptive words that Paul writes but it takes strength of will to live up to most of them, don't you think?

“Love never ends,” Paul says. In the Divine sense, that is absolutely true; however, in the human sense, love does not always survive in marriages, among families, or in friendships. Does that mean those wonderful words ring hollow? Probably, if you are a cynic and you are considering only the imperfect understanding that we humans have about love. That irascible old poet Robert Frost writes: *“You’ve got to love what’s lovable and hate what’s hateable. It takes brains to see the difference.”* A French Proverb proclaims that: *Love makes the time pass. Time makes love pass.* But British Actress Joyce Carey said that: *“Love doesn’t grow on the trees like apples in Eden – it’s something you have to make and you must use your imagination to make it too, just like anything else, it’s work.”*

Paul would agree with Carey. He implies that love takes work. Isn't it virtually against the human psyche to be consistently *“patient and kind; not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all*

things, endures all things.” Paul himself did not live up to that high standard. He was impatient. He carried a grudge. He was demanding. I think that he created an ideal to attain that challenged him first and then all of us who followed. Perhaps his words, “Love never ends,” are an encouragement meant to comfort us as we falter and cheer us as we occasionally succeed.

What Paul is trying to tell us is: “Do not take love for granted.” The reality of love in any circumstance is only as strong as the willingness of individuals or communities to work at it. Perhaps that is why these words mean so much to us. And within that short passage is, I believe, the key to transforming the core of human nature.

Jacques Brel wrote his understanding of Love in the song, “*If We Only Have Love.*” Some of the words are:

If we only have love
With our arms open wide
Then the young and the old
Will stand at our side
If we only have love
Love that's falling like rain
Then the parch desert earth
Will grow green again.
If we only have love
We can reach those in pain
We can heal all our wounds
We can use our own names
If we only have love
We can melt all the guns
And then give the new world
To our daughters and sons.

There is a further passage in this chapter that I have read for years without much thought. “*For now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.*” As I read those words for the umpteenth time, I came to a grinding halt. What does this mean? What does it have to do with the earlier passages? It’s complicated because some versions

read, “Through a glass darkly.” Having the expertise of a husband who didn’t avoid Greek in Seminary like I did, I asked his assistance. Neil told me that in Greek, the word is definitely mirror.

Again, what does this mean? In the Roman Empire of the First Century A.D., mirrors were not common; nor were they made of glass. A mirror was made of highly polished metal, often bronze. The reflection that one saw was indeed dim. So, why did Paul use that analogy, I wondered.

When I look in a mirror, no matter how dim, the face that I see is my own. All that I am is in that face in the mirror and only I can see through the dimness to my truth. I can see in my face, my own inconsistencies; my strengths and my weaknesses. I can see the lines in my face that measure a lifetime of learning that flows from good and bad choices. I can see the wisdom that comes from that lifetime and the realization that I still have much to learn. I can see my yearning to be more loving, more caring, more faithful and recognize how far I have come and how much further I still need to go.

When I look at my face in the mirror, the passage that reads, “*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 gave up my childish ways,*” becomes more compelling. As I gaze at my face and the truth beneath that face, I have to ask if I still hold on to the ways of a child. Do I internally stamp my feet and pout when I don’t get my own way? Do I demand love and attention while denying others that same need? I look at myself in the mirror and wonder, am I who I want to be when I grow up?

So Paul’s mirror image may be meant to be a challenge to all of us to unlock the deep places within our souls bringing some light into the dimness. Who is each of us,

really? Have the painful elements of our lives been a hindrance to our growth into spiritual maturity? Have we lost our ability to be happy; to be content? Have we been unable to forgive the pain that has kept us from contentment? Have we lost faith in those words, "Love never ends," forgetting that in all our times, God is with us. It is liberating to confront the inconsistencies in our own lives and begin to understand that we are human. Despite all that inconsistency, God's love is constant, real and healing. We all have much growing to do just as Paul still had much growing to do. Knowing himself, perhaps Paul is inviting us to do what he needs to do?

I gaze at my face in that dim mirror, learning again what I already know about myself and I know that no matter how far I have come or how much further I need to go, I am loved. I realize that as I am loved, so are you; so is every member of the human family. In that moment, I begin to understand that love is expected of me. It really is that simple. It really is that difficult. Margery Williams who wrote the Velveteen Rabbit understood the strength and power of love. In just four words she summarizes Paul's letter: "Love makes you real."

And as I gaze into the mirror, the dimness begins to fade and I see within my reflection, another face, the smiling face of God. Amen.