

“The Gracious Stubbornness of God”

Jeremiah 1:4-10; I Cor. 12:31—13:13, Luke 4:21-30

Epiphany 4-C, January 31, 2016

It is a great day in South Carolina, isn't it, my friends? It's especially so when we remember that the CAROLINA PANTHERS are headed to SUPER BOWL 50 NEXT SUNDAY TO COMPETE AGAINST THE DENVER BRONCOS. The game will take place in beautiful SANTA CLARA, CALIFORNIA in the new “LEVI'S STADIUM” there, just opened in 2014. It is the home of the SAN FRANCISCO FORTY-NINERS. ENVIRONMENTALISTS tell us that it is the “GREENEST” FOOTBALL STADIUM in the USA today. And COMPUTER EXPERTS tell us that it is also the MOST TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED; having the capacity to seat over 68,000 FOOTBALL FANS AT ONE TIME!

Well having said this, let's also remember that there are ALWAYS SOME UNIQUE ASPECTS ASSOCIATED WITH THE SUPER BOWL EACH YEAR; one of which is the VAST NUMBER OF PEOPLE who turn on their television sets to watch the game each year. In 2015 there were some 114 MILLION VIEWERS, ALTHOUGH MANY OF THEM WERE NOT REALLY FOOTBALL FANS AT ALL. They tuned in primarily to SEE THE COMMERCIALS that they assessed as being downright ENTERTAINING. With all the vast sums of money being spent on these commercials, the producers can certainly come up with some REAL “DOOZIES” FOR SURE!

But there are some other aspects of the SUPER BOWL that are not all that unique, BUT SET IT RIGHT DOWN THERE ON THE SAME LEVEL WITH EVERY OTHER GAME THAT HAS EVER BEEN PLAYED IN THE HISTORY OF THE NFL. And one of these is the PUBLIC'S GREAT TENDENCY TO ASCRIBE THE VAST MAJORITY OF THE GLORY AND ATTENTION TO JUST OF A FEW OF THE TEAM'S KEY PLAYERS, **those sometimes** LABELED AS THE “HIGHLY-SKILLED” PLAYERS **like the** QUARTERBACK, the RUNNING BACKS and the STAR-WIDE RECEIVER.

Unfortunately, there are those other rather UNHERALDED, BIG AND BURLY MEN, OUT THERE ON THE FIELD, GIVING THE GAME THEIR ALL---LIKE THE INTERIOR GUARDS, **who take a great deal of** PERSONAL POUNDING **by doing the tough jobs of the** BLOCKING AND THE TACKLING IN THE GAME WHO ALWAYS SEEM TO FLY FAR BELOW THE RADAR OF PUBLIC ATTENTION AND GLORY AT ALL!

Brothers and sisters, spiritually speaking, something JUST LIKE THIS WAS ALSO TAKING PLACE IN THE TROUBLED CORINTHIAN CONGREGATION THAT ST. PAUL IS ADDRESSING IN OUR EPISTLE LESSON TODAY! There were THOSE MEMBERS WHO POSSESSED SOME VERY POWERFUL, SPIRITUAL GIFTS; LIKE THE GIFTS OF **KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM, PROPHECY** and the **GIFT OF SPEAKING IN TONGUES**, WHO SAW THEMSELVES AS BEING “SUPERIOR” to all the other members of their congregation whom they deemed, somehow, as possessing the FAR LESSER GIFTS THAN THEY HAD; THEREBY MAKING THEM FAR INFERIOR TO THEMSELVES.

I. The Primacy or Preeminence of Love

That's why in verses 1-3, St. Paul speaks to us here initially about the PRIMACY OF LOVE or the PREEMINENCE OF LOVE! You have, no doubt, heard these words many times before throughout your lifetime, haven't you? *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not 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 have not love, I am nothing!”*

Whatever else it is that you and I may have going for us, **without the gift of God's love becoming the** CONTROLLING CENTER OF OUR LIVES, all of those other positive attributes, those spiritual gifts and talents, if you please, could very well end up EVENTUALLY NEVER AMOUNTING TO NOTHING MORE IN THIS LIFE THAN A HILL OF BEANS.

YOU MAY BE HIGHLY INTELLIGENT. YOU MAY BE BLESSED WITH PHYSICAL BEAUTY. YOU MAY KNOW HOW TO CHARM A COBRA while playing the flute so that it rises up out of its straw basket very gracefully without striking you, but WITHOUT LOVE, YOUR LIFE MAY ONLY AMOUNT TO A VERY SMALL FRACTION OF THE KIND OF POSITIVE INFLUENCE THAT GOD INTENDED YOUR LIFE TO BE AND BECOME ON THE LIVES OF OTHERS ALL AROUND YOU!

And here ST. PAUL IS NOT TALKING to us simply about possessing JUST ANY OLD TYPE OF LOVE, but about possessing the SAME KIND OF LOVE THAT ULTIMATELY MOVED JESUS CHRIST TO MAKE HIS WAY TO THE CROSS; WHERE HE **shed his holy, innocent blood for us there and for all people, to redeem us from our sins and to reconcile us completely to his Heavenly Father, thereby also filling us with the gift of ETERNAL LIFE!**

II. The Practicality or the Practical Nature of Love

Then secondly, in verses 4-7, St. Paul goes on to speak to us about the PRACTICALITY OR THE PRACTICAL NATURE OF LOVE. Here Paul gives to us A SOLID DESCRIPTION OF WHAT LOVE IS AND OF WHAT LOVE IS NOT!

Let's never forget that love is actually an "ABSTRACT" NOUN; meaning that IT DOES NOT COME TO US INITIALLY AS A PHYSICAL COMMODITY. You can't purchase love from the corner bakery downtown, the way you can purchase some of your favorite pastries. You can't acquire love for yourself by having it wrapped up in some shiny white paper, like your favorite cold cuts at the DELI and weighed for you upon a scale. You can't SMEAR LOVE ON A GLASS SLIDE IN A LABORATORY and examine it the way you can look very closely at a few drops of pond water under your MICROSCOPE.

You can only see it being present in SOMEONE ELSE'S LIFE, JUST AS THEY HOPEFULLY WILL SEE IT PRESENT IN YOUR LIFE, BY THE WAY THAT YOU AND I SEEK TO LIVE OUT OUR LIVES IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH ONE ANOTHER! Paul says: *"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things!"*

FRIENDS, NO MATTER WHAT OTHER SPIRITUAL GIFTS A BORN-AGAIN BELIEVER MIGHT HAVE GOING FOR THEMSELVES IN THIS LIFE, ANY THEM MAY EVENTUALLY PROVE THEMSELVES TO BECOME COMPLETELY EMPTY AND ABSOLUTELY WORTHLESS TO US IN THIS LIFE --- WITHOUT GOD'S LOVE ALSO BEING PRESENT AS THE CONTROLLING CENTER FOR US ALSO IN OUR LIVES!

III. The Permanency or the Eternal Quality of True Love.

Finally, Paul argues for the eternal quality of love. The rest of the gifts are temporal in their necessity and usefulness, BUT THIS "LOVE NEVER ENDS." It is one of a very few things that abides, and it is the greatest of them. "FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE ABIDE, THESE THREE; BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE!"

WE NEED FAITH NOW TO BRING US INTO A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, but we will no longer need faith when we see him face to face in eternity. WE NEED HOPE NOW TO MAKE OF US MORE THAN CONQUERORS THROUGH JESUS CHRIST AND GIVE US THE KIND OF STAYING POWER WE WILL ALWAYS NEED TO KEEP TRUSTING IN THE LORD and moving forward in the face of all adversity and despair. But we will no longer need **HOPE** when we eventually do come to that place WHERE THE LAMB OF GOD SITS UPON THE THRONE, HAVING WIPED AWAY EVERY TEAR FROM EVERY EYE AND WHERE THE FORMER THINGS HAVE ALL PASSED AWAY TOO; WHERE THERE IS NO SICKNESS OR DEATH—ANYMORE!

BUT WE WILL ALWAYS ENJOY LIVING FOREVER IN THAT SACRED REALM WHERE ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING IS CONSTANTLY BEING CELEBRATED AND MOTIVATED BY GOD'S OWN LOVE!

Here Paul writes in verses 8: *"Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away!"* -- Friends, I love the way that St. Paul begins this first letter of his here to the Corinthians. He writes: *"To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!"*

Paul is reminding them and us that **we have all been called upon by God to become "saints," meaning his "holy ones," if you please; his people set apart to fully glorify him with our lives!** And yet, whether we know it or not, **WE CAN ALL END UP DAILY, OFFERING UP OUR OWN STUBBORN RESISTENCE TO GOD'S CALL THROUGH OUR VARIOUS MANIFESTATIONS OF LOVE-LESS-NESS IN THIS WORLD.**

What a different posture St. Paul takes in his 2ND LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS, where he goes on to acknowledge that many of the problems he had addressed for this church in this first letter, THEY HAVE NOW NO DOUBT TAKEN TO HEART --- SO MUCH SO THAT 2ND CORINTHIANS HAS BECOME KNOWN TO US TODAY AS ST. PAUL'S -- "GREAT LETTER OF COMFORT." I am sure that St. Paul was including all the members of this Corinthian congregation with himself when he writes in **2 CORINTHIANS 5:14** these remarkable words: *"The love of Christ controls us because we are convinced of this that one has died for all, therefore all have died, and the life we now live in the flesh we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself up for us!"*

BROTHERS AND SISTERS, HAVE YOU EVER STOPPED TO THINK THAT BECAUSE OUR SINFUL NATURE CONTINUES TO CLING SO CLOSELY TO US DAY BY DAY, THAT WE TOO MAY END UP OFFERING TO GOD OUR OWN FAIR SHARE OF STUBBORN RESISTANCE TO HIS REPEATED CALL FOR US TO TRULY BECOME HIS PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD TOO? A STUBBORN RESISTANCE TO GOD? ISN'T THAT WHAT WE SEE THE YOUNG BOY JEREMIAH OFFERING UP INITIALLY TO GOD'S CALL FOR HIM TO BECOME A PROPHET IN THE WORDS OF OUR OLD TESTAMENT LESSON TODAY? What an ominous message it must have seemed to young Jeremiah when God calls out to him: *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you! Before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations" (Vv. 4-5).*

But Jeremiah was most reluctant to answer God's call: *"Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth" (v. 6)!* In the **spirit of Moses at the burning bush, Jeremiah feels totally inadequate and unqualified;** so inadequate and unqualified that he is **even willing to openly express his personal hesitation to God.** The **Lord, however, is very quick to dismiss Jeremiah's objection!**

AND HERE WE CAN SEE IN THIS SINGLE EPISODE SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT ABOUT THE "GRACIOUS STUBBORNNESS OF GOD." OUR GRACIOUS GOD WAS NOT DRIVEN OFF BY JEREMIAH'S RELUCTANCE; NEITHER IS HE REPELLED BY JEREMIAH'S INADEQUACIES. NOR WAS HE DRIVEN OFF BY MOSES' RELUCTANCE, OR THAT OF GIDEON, WHO REPLIED: *"Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house!"* But the LORD said to him, *'But I will be with you, and you shall face the Midianites as one man!" (v. 16)!* In **I Samuel 9:21**, Saul said, **"Am I not a Benjaminite from the least of the tribes of Israel? And is not**

my clan the humblest of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then have you spoken to me in this way?"

In **Luke 5:8**, we read of Peter's initial response to Jesus: *"Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!"*

One more thing: God is always calling upon us to grow up spiritually while we are in this world. None of us can help but grow older chronologically—so long as our hearts keep beating and our brainwaves keep functioning and our lungs keep breathing in oxygen and breathing out carbon dioxide! But this doesn't necessarily mean that we are growing more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ each day!

One sign of our growing spiritual maturity however is the **ability to keep trusting God wholeheartedly to be the Lord and Savior of our lives, even when things don't seem to be going the way we believe they should be going!**

John Claypool is an Anglican priest who shares with us a wonderful story from **ancient China** that goes like this: **There was a farmer who owned only one horse. He depended on the horse for everything; to pull the plow and to draw his wagon. One day, however, a rather ferocious bee stung his horse, and in its great peril the horse ran away—far away into the mountains!**

The farmer searched for him but couldn't find the horse. His neighbors said, **"We are really sorry about your bad misfortune in losing your horse!"** But in response to all those well-meant words of comfort, the farmer said: **"Good news, bad news? Who's to say?"**

A week later his horse came back, accompanied by 12 wild horses that his runaway horse had obviously encountered. Believe it or not the old farmer was able to corral all these fine animals. When the news of what had happened spread throughout the village, his neighbors came to visit him a second time and said, "Congratulations on this bonanza out of the sky!"

To which the old man once again **shrugged his shoulders and replied, "Good news, bad news? Who is to say?"**

The son of the farmer decided to make the most of this good fortune, so he started to break the wild horses so that they could be sold and put to work in the fields. But as he was doing this very thing, he got thrown off one of the stallions and broke very badly his left leg in three places.

When the word of the accident again spread throughout the village, all his neighbors came to him once more to **express their deep personal sorrow over what had taken place!** But once again the **farmer shrugged his shoulders and replied, "Good news or bad news? Who is to say?"**

Two weeks later a war broke out among the people in China in the very province where this farmer and his son were living. **The army drafted every able-bodied man to go to war. But because the farmer's son had been injured, he did not have to go, and it turned out to be the very reason his life was spared, for all of the other men who had been drafted into that army died on the battlefield.**

FROM OUR LIMITED HUMAN PERSPECTIVE, ST. PAUL IS REMINDING US HERE THAT THERE IS ALWAYS FAR MORE GOING ON IN ANY GIVEN SITUATION IN OUR LIVES THAN WE CAN FULLY EVER SEE.

Final judgment on either the tragedy or the value of any event must always be left by us in this life to our graciously stubborn God, who promises to work all things together for good who love him and are called according to his purpose to glorify him with our lives (Romans 8:28).

And isn't this the theme the Bible presents to us especially so powerfully in the story of the Old Testament Patriarch Joseph?

He was sold into slavery, prompted by the jealousy of his brothers! He was framed by Potiphar's wife because he refused to submit to her sexual advances! He was thrown into prison, but eventually because of his gift to interpret the Pharaoh's dreams, he ended up becoming the 2nd highest in command in Egypt, and eventually saves the whole Hebrew people from starvation because of an immense famine in the land!

You remember Joseph's words, don't you, to his brothers when he broke down and wept openly before them: "You meant it for harm, but God meant it for good!"

Who's really to say how a thing will ultimately turn out, and what effect, through the grace of God, even terrible events may eventually have upon our future?

Think about your own life: the job that you lost, or the engagement that was broken, the death of a spouse, or even the painful dissolution of your marriage through divorce. Sometimes the journey of your life takes a much different set of turns from what you had ever expected, but will walk with you through the shadow of death and continue to bless you!

And I believe this holds true not only for each one of us in our personal lives, but also corporately for us in our church life together! *"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope and love abide; these three, but the greatest of these is love!"* Amen