

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
January 30, 2022
Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

Building Capacities for Love

Are you wondering if I'm going to avoid that puzzling and perhaps difficult gospel and just talk about love? I mean, after all, that love chapter is ascribed to our patron, St Paul. Or maybe you're wondering if I'm going to talk about Jeremiah and that wonderful vocational call passage and avoid that gospel? Or maybe you're just waiting to see "what is she gonna do with any of that." Well, I myself can hardly wait to hear what I have to say.

Have you ever had a visit, a visit home that didn't go as planned? A visit where your expectations were one thing, and the realities when you got there turned out to be something else?

Today we continue with Jesus in his visit to his hometown of Nazareth. Everyone in his home congregation is amazed at the gracious words that fall from his lips. And everything is great until he says some things that are true for him and the vision of God that he has come to proclaim that somehow don't quite line up with what folks in Nazareth understand to be the way things are.

This season of Epiphany is a disclosure of who Jesus the Christ is to various groups and individuals. Different people in different situations come to understand in revelatory ways who he is—God made manifest in human form.

Up till now, those disclosures have been received as good news. From the visit of the magi to him when he's a young child, a baby, to his baptism in the River Jordan to the wedding in Cana, the good tidings of great joy of Christmastide have been extended into the new insights and understandings of Epiphany. And that held true through the beginning of his visit home to Nazareth as a preaching and teaching adult as we heard last Sunday.

And then, still in his hometown and his home synagogue, things take a different turn.

What exactly changed in the midst of this visit that started out with such good reviews and astonished hearers? What went sideways?

People who knew us at earlier stages of life often remember us as earlier versions of ourselves. When we go home, if we have grown beyond those earlier versions in ways that don't threaten anybody else's versions of themselves, no worries. But, if something about who we have become and how we make our way in the world is received somehow as a challenge to how others make their way, things can shift gears in dramatic fashion.

And isn't this sort of thing what often makes going home or going back someplace tricky for us as well as Jesus?

He puts it to them pretty clearly in his home congregation. The truth is, he says, in all ages, going back to the prophets Elijah and Elisha, true faith has been found among those thought to be outsiders, as somehow undeserving, even when it has been scarce among those who consider themselves insiders and rely heavily on their pedigree.

Jesus cites a foreign widow and her son and a foreign commander of the army—do you remember these stories? In the midst of a famine a widow in Zarephath, outside Israel in what's now Lebanon, is approached by Elijah, and he says, "Give me something to eat." And she says, "All I have is this tiny little bit of meal and this tiny little bit of oil. I'm about to make a last meal for my son and myself and then we're going to die." And he says, "Feed me first." And she does. And the meal doesn't run out, and the oil doesn't run out until the rains begin again and the famine is over.

And he reminds them of that foreigner Naaman, commander of the army of Syria. Remember that story? He's the only leper healed by Elijah's successor Elisha, and he's a foreigner, too. And he thinks what he's asked by the prophet to do is not worthy of him. Remember this? Because Elisha doesn't even go out to see him. He says, "Tell him to dip himself seven times in the Jordan, and he will be cleansed." So, what he's given is not a test that challenges his mettle; it's a test of humility.

Faith found among these two in the time of Elijah, the time of Elisha. And by now they think he's stopped preaching and gone to meddling, right?

These allusions recalling these stories doesn't go down well. Those in the synagogue, the congregation where he was brought up, are filled with rage. They take action, according to our gospel: they got up from their seats, they led him to the apex of the hill on which the town of Nazareth sits, and intended to hurl him off the cliff. This gives new or renewed meaning to the phrase "pushed over the edge," doesn't it?

The story of the widow of Zarephath and Elijah and the story Naaman the Syrian and Elisha are stories that everyone in Nazareth knew. Why is it so threatening, so enraging to be reminded what is commonly known from the scriptures? Because the realities communicated by those stories exposed their own limitations, and Jesus makes explicit what had been implicit. Maybe they don't have the capacity they would like to think they have.

We could say that the folks in Jesus' hometown didn't like the way Jesus told the truth about the aspirational versions of themselves they wanted to hold onto versus the capacities they actually possessed.

For no matter how fine our goals and intentions and wishes are, they are merely aspirations if we do not have the capacities necessary to bring them into reality.

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If folks in Nazareth were self-deluding about capacities they didn't have, young Jeremiah in our first reading was self-deluding about capacities that he did have.

This is one of the most beautiful descriptions of vocational call in all of scripture. God says, "I'm the one who created you. I've known all about you all along since before you were born. I am telling you that I have given you what it takes to do what I am asking you to do. You have the capacity to do the work that's meant for you. So, no excuses. Don't be afraid. I am with you to deliver you."

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And then there's the epistle reading from 1 Corinthians, one of the most famous and most beloved passages in all of scripture.

If you associate it with weddings, you are not alone. And surely, all of us who have entered into it can testify that marriage will make clear to all of us that love is something you do. Love is active; something we do and express and make manifest in various ways. It is far, far more than the great rush of feelings of being "in love."

This oft quoted and oft cited passage gives us a game plan in a certain way for increasing capacity to love: we have to practice loving. We have to do loving things. We have to build capacity not by wishful thinking but by proactive doing. Build your capacity for love like a muscle.

In language so beautiful and so familiar that we may no longer hear the challenge in it, the passage from 1 Corinthians concludes by calling us to grow up, to put away childish things.

And, really, that's what Jeremiah, Jesus, and our patron St Paul in 1 Corinthians are all saying to us today: assess where we are and get real about what is needed to manifest what God intends for us to do and be.

During COVID lockdown I first became familiar with the work of James Clear. His best-selling book is entitled *Atomic Habits*. The book includes the story of how British competitive cycling was transformed over the years between 2003 and 2008. Before that, British Cycling had been mediocre for more than a hundred years. In 2003, a new coach named Dave Brailsford came on the scene. Rather than issuing a lot of aspirational goals and inspirational talk, Brailsford's strategy was different.

James Clear describes it this way: *What made [Brailsford] different from previous coaches was his relentless commitment to a strategy that he referred to as “the aggregation of marginal gains,” which was the philosophy of searching for a tiny margin of improvement in everything you do. Brailsford said, “The whole principle came from the idea that if you broke down everything you could think of that goes into riding a bike, and then improve it by 1 percent, you will get a significant increase when you put them all together.”*

The aggregation of marginal gains. Gathering all the little bitty improvements: they take on momentum. This is the slow and steady way in which we build capacity. Capacity to love; capacity to do and be. It comes through strategic action not aspiration. And when these small gains start, they begin to have a compounding effect.

After five years of aggregating these marginal gains, these tiny changes in so many areas, British Cycling dominated the events of the 2008 Olympics and did even better at the 2012 Olympics. And in 2012, for the first time in history, a British rider won the legendary Tour de France.

The changing of small things often isn't noticeable. If we're on the outside, we don't necessarily notice anything. In fact, the effect can be that suddenly, out of nowhere, British Cycling was superb. A person or a team or an organization seems dramatically different, greatly improved; we see the end result. But inside, it's numbers of small changes over time, attended to, practiced consistently, producing positive changes.

Of all the remarkable things that are in James Clear's work and his book *Atomic Habits*, I want to leave you with this deceptively simple axiom. He says, “We do not rise to the level of our goals; we fall to the level of our systems.”

This doesn't mean that having goals is bad. It means that goals are not enough. And, it means if we focus on building our capacity as individuals and as a congregation, we will be able to do far more and far better than if we have aspirations without the actions that make them reality.

“We do not rise to the level of our goals; we fall to the level of our systems.”

So, we make our great aspirations reality by making small changes that gain momentum in the desired direction over time. Kind of like orthodontics, having braces. Constant, gentle pressure over time; occasionally tweaked and producing soreness; but then moving on. And little by little, and then more and more, we see the results and growth we desire.

In a way this is what Mother Teresa of Calcutta now St Teresa of Calcutt was talking about when she said, “We cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love.”

If we attend to these small things with great love for the sake of Jesus the Christ we will move in the right direction. And our capacity for love, for loving action, will increase, and we will move toward our aspirations. This is the growing up in Christ that God intends for us. Not wishful thinking but purposeful action rooted in love.