Slap in the Face
C-Epiphany 4; 1 Corinthians 13; Luke 4:14-30; 1/31/16
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Sermon-in-a-Sentence: If we are not willing to listen and respond to the stories and needs of others, especially those who are different from us and stretch us, we are rejecting Jesus, and love, and the Kingdom of God.

Children’s Sermon:

What is your favorite kind of music? What if you only listened to that kind of music and never listened to anything else? You would never be much of a musician if your connection to music was so narrow. You would need to experience and try out many different kinds of music. You would probably always have a favorite kind of music, but you need to experience a broad diversity.

What’s your favorite food? What if that was the only food you every ate? Would you be healthy? Would you be a good cook? No. We need to eat a diversity of food to be healthy. And we need to cook lots of different things to be a good cook.

Who is your best friend? What if all your friends were just like your best friend? All were girls or boys? If you didn’t make friends with anyone who wasn’t just like your best friend, how would that work? What is it that makes a real friendship? Love. You care about them; you support them and help them.

Would you rather have a lot of love in your life or just a little bit? Can you store up love in a bucket? No, the only thing that holds love is relationships. The more friends you have, the more diverse, or different your friends are, the more love comes into your life. We do have limits, we only have so much time to spend with friends, we can only stretch so far, but when we stretch and grow, we end up experiencing more love. That’s part of the reason we come to church, so we can meet people and make friends and experience more love.

Who wants more love? How are you going to get it?

Adult Sermon:

In our Gospel reading this morning Jesus slaps the faith community he grew up in, in the face, and they try to throw him off a cliff. All about love, right? What is going on?

After being tempted by the devil in the wilderness to make his ministry and leadership all about himself, and about power and privilege, Jesus returns to Galilee, filled with the Spirit, and begins to teach in synagogues and to heal and embrace the sick and the outcasts. Then he comes to his hometown Nazareth to teach and preach in the synagogue he grew up in. And initially the response of his faith community, many of whom had watched him grow up, was very favorable. But what they seemed to be hearing was that, finally, God was about to fulfill God’s promise to bless Israel and bless them. And that God’s prophet and maybe even the promised anointed Messiah, was coming from their own village of Nazareth and their region of Galilee, which had always been denigrated by the people of Judah and Jerusalem. There had never before been a prophet from Galilee. Maybe Galilee and Nazareth and this faith community would receive the status and respect that had longed for. Finally, they would not have to sit in the back row at the banquet.
But they weren’t really listening to Scripture reading from Isaiah, or what Jesus was trying to say. This was not just about them receiving, through Jesus, God’s favor and blessing. What Jesus was trying to say, quoting the prophet Isaiah, was that he had been anointed by the Spirit to bring good news . . . not simply to the faith community of Nazareth, but to everyone and especially the poor, to proclaim release for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. This was not just about the regular members of the synagogue; it’s about the people on the fringes, who are suffering, who needed the attention and support of God’s people, the local faith community.

If they strived and stretched, as Jesus did, to connect with and to bless their neighbors, especially the marginalized, then, they too would be blessed. God blessed Israel to be a blessing to all the nations. Not to become the privileged at the top of the ladder. The outpouring of God’s love and blessing that Isaiah foresaw was not limited to, or even targeted at those on the inside. It was aimed at those on the margins. It was intended to be radically inclusive.

Jesus could see they weren’t getting it. Their ears were stopped up. They were blind to their neighbors. And so, he slapped them in the face. He tried to wake them up, . . . for their sake. Jesus reminded them that during the time of the prophet Elijah, when there was a great famine, and many Jewish widows were hungry, Elijah helped the needy Gentile foreigner. And in the time of the prophet Elisha, when there were many lepers in Israel, Elisha cured the Gentile general of an enemy nation.

But the people received and responded to Jesus’ slap in the face, not as a needed wakeup call, but as an insult. They went ballistic, and literally tried to throw Jesus off a cliff!

They didn’t say it out loud, but they shouted it by their actions, “If God didn’t send you here to be our prophet and to focus your attention and blessing on us, we don’t want to have anything to do with you.” They could not hear him. They would not listen. Jesus was not saying that the people of his faith community in Nazareth should be rejected or excluded. He was just saying that all those who have been excluded, segregated, ignored in the past should also be welcomed and included in God’s Kingdom. And he was asking his old faith community to open their hearts and arms to embrace them, the oppressed, the hungry, the homeless, the poor, the foreign immigrant. He challenged them to stretch and grow their love.

The Trinity Institute Webinar on Racial Justice last week at Oblate, which several Reconcilers attended, was powerful, . . . and challenging. Several times, for me, it was a slap in the face.

For example, I’ve known this for a long time, but it hit me hard to hear it again and to have a deeper insight into its cause and consequences. As Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed 50 years ago, the most segregated moment in our American Life is right now, Sunday mornings, when we go to church. It’s still true.

Now it makes sense that a group of people who have similar ideas about who God is and how to interpret Scripture and what God is calling us to do, and have similar tastes for forms of worship or hymns, would come together to worship, and form a “like-minded” faith community. So for most of us at Rec, a more formal liturgy with Eucharist every Sunday, an organ and a talented choir and usually more traditional hymns, feels good.

Much of our worship preferences are shaped by the culture we grew up in. But the cultures we grew up in and have inherited were, in many ways, very racist, and intentionally segregated. And so by holding on to the comforting model of church we grew up in, we have, unintentionally, perpetuated segregation, and institutional racism. We have made a some progress in the Episcopal Church and in our diocese. And
I’m very proud of many things we’ve done here at Rec, in terms of stretching our traditional worship practices to accommodate a more diverse congregation, but, we are still a predominately segregated institution. In many ways, though we would never want to claim credit for it, the institution of the Church, continues to be a major player in sustaining institutional racism and segregation in our neighborhood, our city, our country, our world.

And most churches, especially Episcopalians, are also economically segregated. We’ve made more progress there, but we are still, again, in large part due to our cultural roots, part of the problem.

Being segregated or racist is clearly not part of our mission statement. We would never say our vision, our mission, our strategic priority is to maintain and nurture racial and economic segregation. But it is part of our unintentional reality and impact, even if we try to ignore it. So, as we hold onto and preserve the faith tradition we love, we feel most comfortable in, we, the Church, continue to play a major role in sustaining segregation and racism in our culture.

Ouch! That’s a slap in the face!

As you may have noticed, we read the same Epistle today as last week, 1st Corinthians 13 — a most profound statement of what love is really about. Maybe we should read it every week.

If you’ve studied Paul’s letters to the faith community in Corinth, you know that it was a very polarized and dysfunctional community. Like the synagogue faith community in Nazareth, the privileged were way too focused on themselves, and not their diverse brothers and sisters, both within, and outside their community. Intelligent, successful, prominent people in the faith community and the wider community were, according to Paul, missing the point of what it means to be the Body of Christ, together, what it really means to break bread together. Several sections of Paul’s letters are “slaps in the face.”

Our reading this morning, chapter 13, is a beautiful, profound, inspired, Godly offering of who and what love is really about. Love is the foundation, the starting point and the finish line. But for the first time, I recognize that this beautiful description of love from Paul, begins with a slap in the face.

“If I, if you, if we speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, we am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

Love can only exist in real relationships. Love is all about our connecting and caring for one another, with our neighbor, with those who stretch us, and sometimes push our button, or even slap us. Obviously, Jesus and Paul and God love inclusiveness and diversity in our families and faith communities, probably because inclusiveness and diversity challenge and grow and mature our love. But it’s not easy. Love is never easy. If we are to be inclusive and diverse, we have to listen to others, and hear very different stories that might challenge and stretch our understanding of the world. It’s so much easier to come together with others who look and think and have experienced life more like we have.

Can you imagine how awkward and chaotic and challenging it must have been to go to dinner with Jesus when he invites tax collectors and homeless people and slaves and even women!

It takes lots of intention and focus to listen to those who are so different from us. And it can be an incredible blessing, and a time of growth.

Even in our own families, work cultures, faith communities, we tend to gather with those who are most like us. We tend to avoid those who we see as different, and who we think may see the world differently from us. When you come into breakfast or coffee hour in our parish hall, do you look for a table with a
newcomer, a stranger, or perhaps someone who is of a different generation, or who you know has some different views than your own. Someone who might stretch your love? Or do you look for the ones you always sit with, who you share much in common with? Often those choices are not even conscious, but they still have consequences. And if we don’t intentionally come together across differences, what happens? We become, or remain, more segregated and isolated and opinionated in our families, among our friends, in our faith communities, within our political bodies.

Our diocese is blessed to have a large number of younger clergy compared to most Episcopal dioceses. But because we are a fairly conservative diocese, many of these younger clergy, who come to our diocese, are pretty conservative, which surprised me, because usually we think younger generations are more progressive. And it frustrated me, because I am usually trying to stretch the diocese in various ways. So, I didn’t spend much time with the conservative young clergy or listen to them, because they didn’t want to listen to me!

But then John Lewis and I, as a way of exploring and imagining the Church of the future, helped plan and organize a Benedictine “Communal Living Retreat” in Colorado last September. And we intentionally invited younger clergy, and several of them were from that more conservative group.

The experience was transformative for me, because we intentionally spent time together and did things together. We cooked meals together, instead of hiring someone to cook and serve our meals. We cleaned up together. We took on work projects together. We hiked together. All of these activities helped us listen to each other on a much deeper level. And in the process, we broke down many of the barriers that had segregated us.

That experience is what inspired me to recommend that we make the focus of our Lenten Home Groups this year exploration of the Benedictine model of “communal living.” We are going to form the home groups primarily on a geographic basis as opposed to a generational or theological basis. We want to mix generations. We want long-time Reconcilers sitting down with newcomers. Young parents with grandparents. And as a way of breaking down barriers, we want to do a variety of things together. Cook together, find a service project to do together, do some fun things together. All of these things, based on my own retreat experience, and the Benedictine model of “communal living,” will help us to listen and hear each other better, and enable us to build deeper relationships that span generations, and other major differences.

We are inviting you starting today, to simply sign up to be a part of a Lenten Home Group. And then, we will assign you to a group, probably in or near your zip code, that will hopefully be as diverse as possible. Maybe not the group you would have picked. But hopefully the group that will allow you to have a deep, profound experience. . . . maybe a bit of a stretching.

I hope and pray that the full diversity of our Reconciliation community will come together, and by developing deeper relationships, experience love.

Or as Paul or Jesus would say: experience God.

Amen