

“A New Language”
Luke 4:14-21
1 Corinthians 13
November 10, 2024

There’s an old story about a mother mouse who was leading her young children on a walk through an open field one day. It was a beautiful day, the sun was out, the children were behaving nicely when all of a sudden, a cat looms large in front of the mother mouse and her babies. The mother mouse reacts. She draws up on her haunches, looks the cat right in the eye and says “Bow-wow!” The cat runs away. The mother mouse turns to her little ones and says, “I hope you see the value of knowing a second language.”

I think the Apostle Paul is trying to instruct his listeners or his readers in the value of not just knowing a second language but letting a new language of love become our primary means of communication. Many times, we hear this Scripture read at weddings and so we tend to associate it with a romantic take on love – love that is candlelight and roses and beautiful brides and handsome grooms and as such it does have a place, but Paul is not writing about romantic love here.

Paul wrote these words to a church that was having trouble. They were all out of kilter with one another. The preacher Fred Craddock used to tell a story about visiting an old family cemetery out along the eastern seaboard. All the graves in this cemetery were lined up neatly in rows, east to west. Everything was very tidy. That is, until he came to a grave that was all out of kilter. Instead of running east to west, it ran more north to south, causing a general disruption, taking up way too much ground and throwing all the neat rows out of balance. He asked why the grave would be like that and he was given the explanation that the guy that was buried there had a reputation for living his life out of line, out of sorts, out of kilter with everyone around him and so when it came time to bury him the family figured he should spend his whole eternity in the same way he lived his whole life – being a general disruption and nuisance.

That’s kind of what was going on in Corinth. This church had all sorts of people. It had the well-educated and the uneducated. It had the up and coming and the down and out. It had those who were well versed in faith and those brand new to the faith. It had those who believed they were spiritually gifted and those who appeared to be spiritually inept. And they didn’t know how to get along. They didn’t know how to line up together. They were all out of kilter, arguing over whose spiritual gift was the best. The more they argued the more damage they inflicted, damage to one another, damage done to the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Arguing, dissension and general nastiness was the context into which Paul addressed his words. Paul’s answer to all of this fighting – strive for a more excellent way and he began to teach them about love, a love that went far beyond just words. This was a love that demanded that one learn a new language, a second language. This love required one to live a new life.

So, what does this new life look like? Paul says what this love is and what it is not. Love is patient. Love is kind. It rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. On the other hand, 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. Were you keeping a checklist on all these attributes. If you had to rate yourself according to Paul’s standard, what score would you give yourself?

Truthfully, even on our best days most of us don't come very close to living out this radical love. That doesn't mean that it is OK not to try. We will only become more proficient in this language and living this love if we keep speaking it and practicing it.

Back in high school the family of one of my friends opened their home to an exchange student from Brazil. She came speaking a little English and over the course of the semester she grew more and more comfortable with her new language skills until at last one day she proudly told us she knew she was doing better because she was beginning to dream in English. Her conscious behavior was having an effect on her unconscious dreams.

Paul tells us that whatever behavior we demonstrate in our lives, whether it be speaking in the tongues of angels, or having the words of a prophet or even faith, it means nothing if we don't have love. I don't think he is telling us that we shouldn't act responsibly or graciously until we love. I believe Paul is telling us the more excellent way of living that we are to strive for is the blending of our loving and our living until they become one and the same. The language of love that inhabits our dreams becomes the impetus for our behavior and our loving behavior is the stuff that feeds our dreams. This love, the love that never ends, is fired in the crucible of living out the love that God has first shown to us.

This is the love that reached out to Jeremiah before he was even born and appointed him as prophet. And when Jeremiah protested and said "Don't choose me. I'm just a boy. I can't do this." God said to him "Stop making excuses! I will be with you and I will give you the words. You will speak my language." And Jeremiah did.

Later God sent another Word, a Word that became flesh. Jesus came and stood in the Jordan river and was baptized and God spoke words of anointing saying "This is my beloved." The Spirit of God came and filled him and according to Luke one of the first places Jesus came to was his hometown in order to share God's vision for a new life.

Jesus shared God's vision for humankind, for all creation, using the words of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus said "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. This scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus spoke the dream of God and Jesus went on in his ministry to show us how to bring the dream of God to reality by living out and living in the love of God.

Maya Angelou writes in her book "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" the idea that to really love someone is to know the song their heart sings and to hum it back to them on the days they forget how it goes. It's a beautiful way of saying what it is that God has done for us in Jesus Christ. God created us in his image and out of his immeasurable love. God knows the song we are to sing for God has touched our lips and put that love song in our hearts. Only we have a tendency to forget the tune.

And so, in worship, in prayer, in singing of hymns, in studying the Scriptures, the Spirit of the living Christ comes and hums the song of God's love back to us. It begins to inhabit our dreams, it affects our living and over time we can become more patient, more kind, less envious, less boastful, less irritable or resentful, less insistent on our own way and more able to accommodate the needs of others. With God's love humming within us we are able to go out to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.

The time for living this love language is now. Paul wrote this letter to address a problem in the church but its message fits not just church relationships but all of our interactions with others. Our country has just gone through a long and divisive election. While some are more hopeful about the future, many others are more anxious about the future. We have been living

out of kilter with one another and it's difficult to bridge the gap between differing world views. How can we find a way when there seems to be no way? Perhaps the answer is the one Paul gave to the church in Corinth who struggled to live out its calling with one another and with the greater world. The answer at that time and I believe for now is living a life of love. It is that simple and at the same time it is that difficult.

For God's vision for this world does not come without risk. Jeremiah spoke the Word that God gave to him and found himself thrown into a well. When Jesus spoke in his hometown, among his neighbors, among good Church folk, he was almost thrown off a cliff and eventually he would lay down his life for love's sake. Never underestimate the serious claim of God's love on your life. It will take you to the cross, it will bring you to your knees, it will call upon you to confront evil, it will make you a servant of others. It will inhabit your dreams and your waking moments. It will never leave you. And one day this love of God will complete you.

In the meantime, it is a good thing to remember we are all just learning this language. None of us have sung the whole song. We know only a part. But, for now, that is enough to get us started. As we speak the words of love over and over and as we live out that love we join with Christ in the work of the Kingdom, it is then that the poor can begin to hear the good news, the captives can be released, the blind can recover their sight, the oppressed will go free, the year of the Lord's favor will be proclaimed. The day will come when we will all see face to face and know as we have been fully known. The day will come when we will love as we have been loved. Until that day comes our call is to keep on learning this new language.

Richard Rohr has written a prayer with which I would like to close.

God, lover of life, lover of these lives,
 God, lover of our souls, lover of our bodies, love of all that exists
 It is your love that keeps it all alive...
 May we live in this love.
 May we never doubt this love.
 May we know that we are love,
 That we were created for love,
 That we are a reflection of you,
 That you love yourself in us and
 Therefore we are perfectly lovable.
 May we never doubt this deep and abiding and perfect goodness.
 We are because you are.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen