

Love's Vulnerability

From the sermon series: Now – But Then

Luke 2:12; I John 4:16; I Corinthians 13:4-8

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Now - But Then, a phrase that comes from Paul's hymn of love in I Corinthians, the 13th chapter, where he contrasts the present and the future, the reality in which we live and the hope that we dream for another kind of world and experience. The Church of England makes this statement, entitling it "Christian Believing." I shared it with you last Sunday morning; I think it's worth repeating.

The Christian life is an adventure, a voyage of discovery, a journey sustained by faith and hope towards a final and complete communion with love at the heart of all things.

We have considered together the faith, the trust with which we live, and the hope that we have that the darkness will be dispersed by the light, and we come this evening, finally, to that supreme gift of which the Apostle writes - the gift of love. Faith, hope and love abide, but love is the greatest, says the Apostle Paul. And John would agree, for John says that God is love. And this evening for just a few moments, think with me about love - love's vulnerability. We say that love came down at Christmas, and this is such a beautiful time of the year and it's very easy to get blurry-eyed, to get lumps in the throat, tears in the eyes. The mystery of it, the wonder of it, just the beauty of it - all of that is really a marvelous gift to be taken in fully and to be celebrated and appreciated.

But, it's also possible, as we talk about the love that came down at Christmas, to get a bit sentimental and to forget the real context out of which the Christmas story arises. Christmas in conjunction with a consideration of love caused me to think about love's vulnerability, because the love that came down at Christmas was the love that became vulnerable in a world that finally crucified it. The love that came down at Christmas is a love that entered into the very real world. The Christmas Gospel, the Christmas story is really quite a social criticism. We can forget about that in all of the sentimentality of the season, but Jesus came a child born into a very harsh world. And those to whom he came praised God because they saw his gift as a reversal of the reality they were living. The songs in the beginning of Luke's Gospel are really revolutionary ballads. They celebrate the

lifting up of the lowly and the putting down of the arrogant and the powerful. They are the songs of the voiceless and the powerless, ones who believed that God is visiting their lives and that their reality will be changed through this divine visitation. The love of which they speak is the love that took concrete form in the flesh of a child, but the flesh of a child that entered into a social, economic and political context that was criticized by the very appearance of that child in its midst.

Love's vulnerability. As I think about that, I think about the concreteness of love. Love - everybody talks about love, everybody sings about love. Love is used in such diverse manner to cover so many different things, and for the most part it's really very superficial. It's very easy to say love. "I love you," "I love that." But, the love that came down at Christmas was God's concrete identification with a human reality that was harsh and brutal, and that visitation came with the intention of creating another kind of reality. Paul talks about Now - But Then, and I want to suggest to you tonight that the movement from Now, in the darkness, to the Then of the dream is possible only through the vulnerability of love. The love that came down at Christmas, in its manifestation, was vulnerable, for the heart of God was revealed in a child. Not in the intimidating presence of some great king, not with a blinding flash of glory. The love that came down at Christmas was a vulnerable love in its manifestation. Who would have guessed that love would be found enfleshed in a child? Quite God-like. Quite uncharacteristic of our own revelation of ourselves.

But, love's vulnerability is seen not only in its manifestation, but also in its identification. For love came down at Christmas to a manger, to the peasants, to be adored by poor shepherds. The love that came down at Christmas, the love that revealed the heart of God was the love that identified with the weak and the powerless and the voiceless.

I don't expect you to remember the first Sunday in Advent, but when I got into this theme I suggested to you as we gathered around the Lord's Table, that it is only through life broken and poured out that we can possibly move from the Now to the Then. It seems like the human story is only moved, nudged along at all through some demonstration of love that involves the self-giving of the lover. And in the identification of that love, of Christmas, with the poor and the weak and the voiceless and the powerless, there was a sharp criticism of the way our world is structured and the way our lives are structured.

As I suggested to you on the first Sunday of Advent, when I get thinking about these things too deeply, I ask the question, "Is it possible for affluent, powerful, mostly white people like us to be Christian?" Have we not spiritualized it? Have we not made it a beautiful tale of God's love? Have we not made it a salvation story? Have we not made it something that pertains to that vertical relationship between the individual and God and forgotten that in that manifestation of love in the child there was the identification with the poorest of humankind, with the

promise that their destiny would be altered and that another reality was dawning in the world?

Love's vulnerability. I looked the word up. I use it all the time; I think I know what it means, but sometimes it's good to go to the dictionary and just say what does it say about this word, vulnerable? I found that, in the big, fat dictionary that I use, it says that vulnerability is exposing oneself to the possibility of woundedness, exposing oneself to the possibility of injury. That's a good definition. That's a definition of the love that came down at Christmas. Was not the heart of God revealed in the child in a way vulnerable, exposed to injury, exposed, indeed, to crucifixion? Is not the fact that the love, which came down at Christmas, was finally nailed to a cross a sign that that love contradicts the world, contradicts our society, contradicts our manner of life, contradicts the living out of the Gospel by the Christian church?

Love's vulnerability. What is the love that became vulnerable at Christmas? Well, John says God is love. Not simply God loves, but God is love, which means that out of the fountainhead of God, love permeates the whole of creation, so that all that there is of love is that which flows from the heart of things. At the heart of things, there is love. And out of that heart of reality flows love into creation. And John says, further, that God is known in the concrete love of the other. The one who abides in love, abides in God. Paul makes that very concrete. Sometimes in the history of the Church, in the tradition of the Church, the Ten Commandments are read in every service. But, I must say I am never so stricken as when I read Paul's description:

Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant, does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, it believes all things, it hopes all things, it endures all things. Love never ends.

At the heart of things is love, and that love flows into the whole created order. And that love seeks to flow through us and to find concrete shape and manifestation through us, who are the extension of the Incarnation. And the only way to live out the Christmas Gospel is to live in the vulnerability of love. And I don't do it very well. Love is patient and I'm impatient. Love is kind, and I'm not always. Love is not envious and I am. Love is not boastful or arrogant or rude and sometimes I plead guilty. Not irritable or resentful? Not true of me. Doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing? Sometimes I do, when it's your wrongdoing. Rejoices in the truth? Generally. Bears all things? Hopes all things? Endures all things? Dear God! To live love is to live vulnerably. Why, it's to be a veritable fool!

Love's vulnerability. As I think about it, it seems to me that love in its shape is *other-centered* rather than being *self-centered*. Love, in its vulnerability, acts concretely with compassion. Love in its vulnerability believes in the ultimate triumph of love. Love in its vulnerability cares infinitely, never giving up. And

love in its vulnerability identifies with the most vulnerable of its brothers and sisters.

Someone has said that a society can be judged by how it relates to its most vulnerable members. There's a battle raging in this nation right now and the poor and the voiceless and the powerless are in the game as there's a struggle, and I don't have the political solution, but this I will tell you - in this nation that is rich and is powerful, God holds us accountable for the way we treat the weakest and the most vulnerable, and if we do not do that with compassion, if our hearts do not cry out for justice, if there is not within us a consuming care that won't quit, then all of this beauty and this wonder is just a game. Now there is so much darkness, but we dream of the possibility of Then, something other.

Some years ago there was a film that moved me greatly. It was called "Places of the Heart." Perhaps you saw it A rural Texas farmer is murdered His widow is left with a crop to harvest. A Black man comes through town looking for work. She hires him. She boards a blind man. Between them, they struggle and they harvest the crop and they save the farm, only to see the Ku Klux Klan move in and drive the Black man away with their burning cross in the yard And one's heart sinks and one has to say, 'That's always the way it is!'

But, the film then moves off into an ethereal future and there's a church service in that little rural community. And there's the man who was murdered and the man who murdered him. There's the bully of the Ku Klux Klan and the Black man and the widow and the blind man. And they pass the bread and the cup down the row with the words, "The peace of Christ be with you." And at first I wondered if the filmmaker was mocking the communion of the church as though one thing goes on out there and then we come here as though it isn't true, but I think, rather, he was saying, since the passage that was read in the service was I Corinthians 13, Now - But Then. Then, finally. Love's vulnerability will triumph over all of our selfishness and our self-centeredness and our failure to care.

Christmas, if it would effect the miracle in our lives, must change us, calling us to love's vulnerability. I have an idea. I think I may even act on it. I want to print and mail to you in some fashion I Corinthians 13 and suggest that the whole Christ Community put it up on the cupboard or the refrigerator or the mirror and read it every day of 1996 until we are so permeated by love's vulnerability that we, like the eternal God, find ourselves naturally manifesting love and identifying with the loveless until Now becomes Then.