

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, C
Jeremiah 1:4-10
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

Pastor Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon
January 30, 2022

A friend of mine said she just feels like giving up. She works in a health care setting, and these days she's so tired she barely has two brain cells to rub together. She's not sure what will help. She usually enjoys her job and finds it meaningful, but lately she's been fantasizing about leaving. She's not alone. We're hearing about a phenomenon called "the great resignation" – large numbers of people quitting their jobs, looking for a change, or just giving up. It's related to the stresses and strains of pandemic, of course, but it's also been observed that quitting can be contagious. When enough employees decide to move on, the ones left behind may start to wonder, "Am I missing something? Maybe I should think about quitting too."

We are hoping this friend can recharge her batteries and reinvest. Everyone around her can see how worthwhile her work is, even if right now she can't feel its significance or value. We are doing our best to encourage her. Because if discouragement can be contagious, then encouragement can be even more contagious. And that's what we are about in Christian community.

Encouragement is what I find in this Sunday's scriptures. As I read through the famous hymn to love in First Corinthians 13, these particular words begin to glow for me, they practically leap off the page: *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.*

These words inspire resilience. We often read them at a wedding, a time of fresh new beginnings. But they speak even more powerfully to times when the freshness has worn off, when people of faith are tired and stressed and having trouble remembering their life's purpose. This scripture reconnects us with God's eternal and boundless love that never gives out.

The church at Corinth started off strong, but over time the people fell into conflict and backbiting. Members took each other to court over small disagreements, they split into factions over which former pastor they liked best, their worship practices favored the rich and shut out the poor. There was sexual scandal, idol worship, and a divisive spirit of me-first competition. To look at them, you would never guess that it was Christ's self-giving love that had made them a community. Yet love was meant to be the center of who they were—Christ's love that welcomed sinners, Christ's love that went to the cross. So Saint Paul called them back to the value of love.

The love Paul lifted up is not a warm feeling – it is an action. Independent of any feelings, love is active, love gives. "Love is as love does." The Greek word *agape* means

self-giving love. This love promotes the well-being of another person. This love puts the other person's welfare in first place. Just imagine how that church in Corinth could have been transformed if every person realized they were created for *self-giving love*. All that energy that was bound up in backbiting and selfishness would be released to promote healing and service and good.

Because truly, love is what we are all created for. Love is our highest purpose, love is our destiny. We are born to be vessels for love flowing from the Creator who first loved us, love flowing through us to others. In this way God intends to heal all creation, and we are part of it.

Love never ends, because the grace of God never ends. God's love never fails, it doesn't give up or give in or run out. And because of this, our love can persevere too.

I'm often amazed how much there is to learn about enduring, persevering love. I used to think of love as something soft and comforting and gentle. Love was kindness that hugs and soothes and supports. And this is one face of love, but I keep on earning that love has more to offer. Love doesn't have to make everything right for other people. Love can survive in places where approval is not returned. Love is resilient, it doesn't give up. Love can set boundaries, and love needs to set boundaries, for the health and well-being of ourselves and others. Love can be firm when necessary. Love can have a backbone. Love can speak with conviction, it can ruffle feathers – the way Jesus did in that hometown synagogue when he reminded the people that God loves outsiders just as much as insiders. That loving insistence got Jesus run out of town!

Love will always challenge old prejudices and systems of racism and oppression. Because love concerns itself with the wellbeing of the whole human family, and love knows we all belong to one another. Our fate is connected with everyone and everything on this planet.

I am continually inspired by people who refuse to give up on love. I think of all the families caring for young children these days, the 24-7 task of raising up young lives, the extra burdens of pandemic and school and child care changes. Families are learning through experience how *love bears all things, love endures all things, love never ends*. I am also continually inspired by the resilient love people extend to family members who are going through a dark or difficult passage, be it illness or some other challenge. They may not know how to help their loved one. They may be personally powerless to bring about healing or change. Yet they will never give up on loving. Their love is resilient, it is strong in itself as it searches for a way forward. This is *love that never ends*, and it is being lived out quietly, profoundly, day in and day out, with God's help.

I wonder what God is teaching you about love these days. And I wonder how we can support one another in the love that *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. The love that never ends.*

It's disturbing how openly love is mocked in our culture today. We used to be shocked by this, but now it's common for public figures to be boastful and arrogant and rude. The angrier the voice, the better it plays in some quarters. Once we had the hope that a worldwide pandemic would bring humanity together, but we actually see a disturbing lack of love. Selfish voices insist on their rights and refuse public health efforts meant to protect others. It seems like some people don't care if their neighbors live or die.

Looking around, it becomes obvious what a radical enterprise self-giving love really is – and always was. Yet we do have the power to love, because God's love never fails. It only urges us on.

And we can dare to dream of a society shaped by love. I recently discovered the writings of bell hooks*, whose imagination was captivated by love at an early age. She was a scholar and cultural critic, a pioneer in women's rights who spoke forthrightly out of her own African American and queer identity. Throughout her career as a teacher and writer, bell hooks was especially moved by the failure of love, the places where love was lacking. She was keenly aware of how people are wounded by lovelessness and brokenheartedness, whether in interpersonal relationships or societal injustice. She was motivated to ask: *What would it take for ours to become a culture of love? What would happen if all public policy was created in the spirit of love, out of true commitment to the wellbeing of the other?* That's a radical vision. *What would happen if public policy was created in the spirit of love?* bell hooks strove to practice the "sacrament of love" from her Christian and Buddhist practice. When she died in December, social media was filled with testimonies of how her work changed people's lives and gave them a sense of purpose and meaning. She truly conveyed the radical power of love that never ends.

Saint Paul writes that love is timeless. Love even lasts beyond the grave. Because the love we receive from others becomes part of us forever, so that this love we practice in Christ's name, this pathway we follow, has eternal worth. No love we share is ever wasted. Every loving action contributes something to the human family and the community of creation. Love never dies.

Saint Paul alludes to one day in the future when we will see God face to face. There will be a day, beyond the gate of death, when we will exist with God in a space of pure love. I personally take a great deal of comfort from that. To think that even the greatest love we can express in this earthly life is only a shadow of the love God radiates, a fullness of love that someday we ourselves will experience and know. *Love that never ends.*

This past Friday evening I was privileged to represent First Immanuel congregation at the bedside of Pam Porter in her last hours. Her daughter Stephanie and I commended Pam into God's care, and we said goodbye. Pam was a longtime resident of NW Portland. For many years she was the property manager of the Northwest Neighborhood Cultural Center, that historic building on Everett Street where the children's theater is housed. I remember the day when both Pam and Stephanie were baptized here at church – it was All Saints Day in 2006. I don't know what made that the right day for them to join this congregation and receive God's baptismal blessing. My understanding is that for many years Pam had been aware of First Immanuel's influence in the neighborhood and had come to know that here she would find love that could embrace her, both in this life and forever. So she and Stephanie came for baptism, and God's love was something Pam held onto through the many illnesses she experienced over the years. I am so thankful that this congregation's witness is able to communicate that kind of love to those around us. Love that anchors people both in this life and into the life beyond. *Love that never ends.*

As we hold our Annual Meeting after worship today, it's good to realize that it is so much more than a business meeting. It is one way we tend to a community that is formed out of Christ's sacred love. It is one way we care for a congregation whose heart beats with the Creator, a community whose purpose is to share God's outreaching love in every way with the world God loves. Every one of us has a part in this ministry—we extend God's love wherever we live and work and relate to others and creation. From this congregation God's boundless love goes out in ways that truly have no end.

It is a privilege for all of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

*Note: I was completely captivated by bell hooks's book, *All About Love*, and I commend it to you.