

When It's Hard to be a Christian

Psalm 71, I Corinthians 13:1-13

Center Church, Hartford

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You know I love these beautiful windows; I think they can be tremendous aids to meditation and prayer. But I also think they are a bit of a problem. We come in here and we can't see outside, unless we go up to the balcony. We can come in here to worship and pretend the city and all its challenges is simply not there. Sometimes we really need that, don't we, just to get away from the world-ness of the world and be in quiet beauty. And that's okay; Jesus used to go up into the mountains from time to time to pray, too.

Not all the time, though. Most often when Jesus taught (preached?) and prayed, he did so outside or in peoples' homes, surrounded by the stuff of daily life. His disciples sometimes tried to shield him from the world, but he kept pushing them aside and entering right back in: sick people, mentally ill people, angry people, arrogant people, violent people. If the good news was to mean anything, it had to mean something in the context of the world, not in escaping from it.

You know it was a couple hundred years before Christians built buildings for worship. You can see frescoes from the earliest known building set aside specifically for worship down at the Yale Art Museum in New Haven. For the first 2-3 hundred years, Christians gathered to worship outside, by rivers, and in peoples' homes and workplaces. Since most of the earliest congregations were in cities, the sounds and sights of the city surrounded them. Sunday was not a day off in those days, so life went on in all its beauty, drudgery, sorrow, joy, and struggle.

So, you see, when we come in here and these lovely windows block out the city, we can easily forget that the faith we come here to strengthen is a faith meant to be lived out in the world, in the rest

of our lives, our work, our study, our relationships, our neighborhoods, the city.

Which is when it gets dicey.

In theory, in here, it is easy to say, "love is patient, love is kind, 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, but rejoices in the truth." In life outside the quiet separateness of this sanctuary, it's a whole different story isn't it. Because out in the world, often, we base how we treat people not on this kind of love, but rather on what is "fair," whatever that means, or on what we think is best for us and our family, or on whatever our own personal, often unacknowledged, negative assumptions are regarding people who are of a different race or ethnicity than us, or people who are poor, or are rich, or have been in prison, or have a different gender identity or sexual orientation than we have. Out there, we easily let these things put exceptions to the kind of love we so blithely celebrate in worship.

But that love is not for just in here. Here is where we are called to practice loving like that so we can be good at it when we go back out there! Because it is hard! God knows that. Jesus certainly knew it. He kept modeling how to do this and his disciples kept wanting exceptions (Can't I just forgive someone a couple of times? Do I have to keep doing it? Do I really have to be nice to Roman Soldiers; do you know what these guys are doing, Jesus? You really shouldn't be talking to foreign women, Jesus, they don't deserve your time.)

Jesus wouldn't make exceptions, and it got him killed.

There's a reason that elsewhere Paul says we need to put on the "armor" of Christ! It's really hard to "live in love as Christ loved us." In here and out there. And the armor needs to be protection not just from people out there, but from our own worst instincts. I need

some chain mail just to deal with my penchant for being envious and resentful! This scripture I part of my armor!

I have a project for us. In about 10 days we celebrate a holiday supposedly dedicated to love. Actually, I think it is dedicated to merchants of chocolate and flowers, but why not? Can we broaden this holiday to spend the time between now and Valentine's Day working on a Valentines' Day project, like we used to do in school? Can we work on how we love people we know, and people we don't know? Take whichever of these things is your weak spot, and work on it: patience, kindness, envy, the kind of pride that separates you from others, the need to make yourself look good at the expense of others, arrogance, rudeness, needing to get your own way, being irritable, being glad when someone gets what you think they deserve when that is a negative thing.

You don't need money to buy chocolate and flowers to work on this; God is seeking to know your love in actions, not in gifts. "If I give away all my possessions and even my body, but don't have love, I gain nothing."

Let us make this our Valentines' Day project: practicing love when it is hard to love, in the rough and tumble of daily life, beyond the stained glass. Take the heart in your bulletin and write down which aspect of love you will practice each day, then put the heart somewhere you will see it as you go about your work or life at home: on the bathroom mirror, the computer, the back of the front door. When you come back at night, check in with yourself to see how you are doing!

We started worship today with a Valentines gift from God, a lovely meal, that is, a meal filled with love. Now go forth and be what we have eaten. Practice Love. Amen.