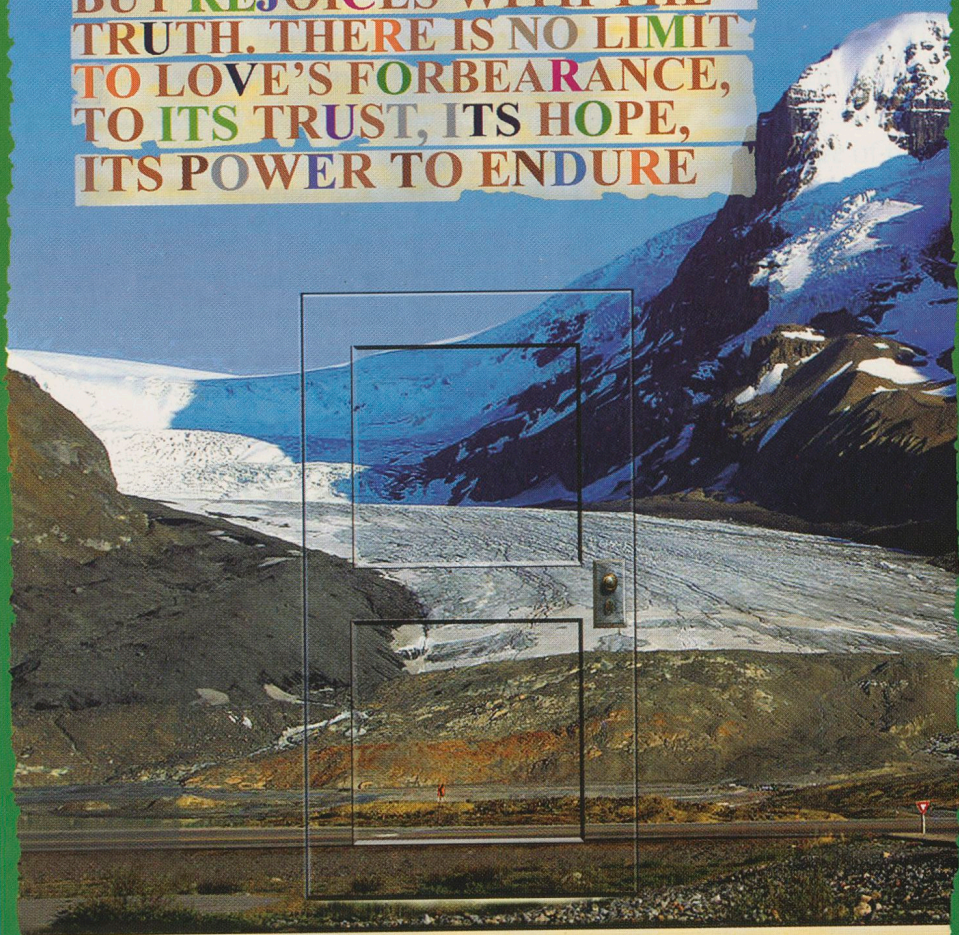


LOVE IS PATIENT; LOVE IS
KIND. LOVE IS NOT JEALOUS,
IT DOES NOT PUT ON AIRS,
IT IS NOT SNOBBISH. LOVE
IS NEVER RUDE, IT IS NOT
SELF-SEEKING, IT IS NOT
PRONE TO ANGER; NEITHER
DOES IT BROOD OVER IN-
JURIES. LOVE DOES NOT RE-
JOICE IN WHAT IS WRONG
BUT REJOICES WITH THE
TRUTH. THERE IS NO LIMIT
TO LOVE'S FORBEARANCE,
TO ITS TRUST, ITS HOPE,
ITS POWER TO ENDURE





FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

CYCLE C

Jeremiah 1: 4-5, 17-19
1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13
Luke 4: 21-30

GATHERING

(A partially opened gift box and an unlit candle rest on a platform covered with green cloth. Paper hearts of various colors cascade from the gift box onto the table. A bowl of heart-shaped candies with messages on them rests on the table. The platform can be created with several books or an empty box. A bag of individually wrapped candies is kept on reserve for the closing.)

As New Year's resolutions begin to move from passionate convictions to faded memories, we reflect on the work of love and discipline in our choices and the cost of discipleship in our lives.

OPENING PRAYER

(The candle is lit. The leader passes the bowl of candy. He/she calls the community to quiet, asking that members notice the other members while offering a silent prayer of love. An instrumental selection plays in the background.)

When the music is complete, the leader invites members to offer a word or phrase that expresses what is in their hearts at the moment. As members share their reflections, they enjoy the candy. When these reflections are complete, the community prays as follows.)

All: Good and gracious God, you have called us by name to be here today and we know that this will call for a response from us. Help us to be your heart, to reflect your love, to see with your eyes, to speak your word, to bring light into the lives of the people we meet this day and every day. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

*(Inviting members to join him/her in making the sign of the cross, the leader prays, “**God** [forehead] **is** [heart] **now** [left shoulder] **here** [right shoulder]” .)*

Focus Question

How can you tell when someone really loves you?

SCRIPTURE SHARING AND REFLECTION

(The scriptures are proclaimed aloud with a pause after each reading. Following a pause after the gospel reading, the facilitator invites members to mention a word, a phrase or an image from one of the readings that particularly struck them this week. Members then read over the commentary and consider the questions in silence for several minutes before entering into conversation.)

Commentary

Throughout the gospels, Jesus is heard saying, “Follow me,” more than 80 times. Throughout our lives, we are constantly challenged to follow Christ by following the simple commands: Love God and love your neighbor. This is, of course, easier said than done. Yet it is the one thing for which God has already equipped us. It is an awesome thing to reflect on the words, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I dedicated you.” How do we know when we are doing *the thing* for which God has dedicated us? When our life seems out of balance, perhaps it is an indication that we are running away from *that thing* we are supposed to be doing.

For Jeremiah, speaking God's word was not an option. It was his whole identity. He felt compelled to speak on God's behalf and admonish people when they were not following those simple commands of love. He challenged those who were exploiting others, abusing power or ignoring the poor. His presence was not welcomed.

The phrase, "Gird your loins," captures the situation of a fully equipped catcher. He is prepared to face any pitched ball no matter how fast it comes at him. But let him turn his back and he is vulnerable to serious injury and pain. God never said that life would be easy but God has promised, and today's psalm reminds us, that he would always be with us. God equips Jeremiah to face life head on. It wasn't easy for him, but Jeremiah stayed in the game. God equips us as well.

The passage from Corinthians is so familiar to us from hearing it at weddings that we might be tempted to skim over it quickly and remark, "Yeah, yeah, I know that." But we would be cheating ourselves of its richness if we did. Replace "love" with "God" and read it again. Do the same with "church", with your own name, with the name of someone you have difficulty with. How does that change your perspective?

Love is the most overused word in our society. We even *love* pizza or the latest fad. The divorce statistics challenge our understanding of *love*: as a choice, a commitment, an action verb. In Pope Benedict's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, he writes, "Since God has first loved us, love is no longer a mere command. It is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us. Love is a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self toward self-giving and self-discovery – and indeed toward the discovery of God".

God's love for us is an unconditional, unearned gift that we have already received. How fully have we opened that gift, reveled in its magnitude, shared it with those around us, and thanked the Giver for the gift? Love never fails. Love is what enhances all the other spiritual gifts. Love is what enables us to be willing and effective disciples.

We don't know everything. We only "know partially." We each have a piece of God's wisdom and all of God's love. We have what we need to be accepting of others. We are called to love. We are called to serve. And though we may not be accepted by those who knew us growing up or by folks around us today, God has called us into the arena to help build the kingdom. Our power comes from vulnerability, even the rejections we might receive, the doubts, the criticism

heaped upon us by family and friends as we try to imitate and follow Jesus. God is love. God is always with us. God never fails.

FAITH SHARING AND INTEGRATION

- ◆ How does the word, phrase or image that struck you from this week's scriptures speak to your life or the life of the community, your family or your world these days?
- ◆ When has love motivated you to do something you did not think you could do?
- ◆ How has what you thought was *love* betrayed you? How did you recover?
- ◆ For whom or what would you sacrifice your love? Your life?
- ◆ What are some of the obstacles to love you have faced?
- ◆ How do you express love to those who are closest to you, to those who are unlovable, i.e. Christ in disguise or Christ in distress, to those who do not feel loved?

RESPONSE IN ACTION²

(The leader poses the question, "What does God ask of you/us in light of our sharing of life and faith this week?" After a few moments of reflection, the leader invites conversation in response to the question.)

- ◆ Contact the Southern Poverty Law Center and ask about resources for teaching tolerance, especially, **A Place at the Table: Struggles for Equality in America**. Some of the material is available to schools and at a minimal cost for others; www.teachingtolerance.org or 400 Washington Ave. Montgomery, AL 36104. Share this material with your parish faith formation program.

- ◆ Call an old/new friend and let him/her know how much their life enhances yours.
- ◆ Prepare Valentine cards for veterans or seniors in group homes in your area. Deliver them on Valentine's Day.
- ◆ Sponsor a *Romancing the Home* night at your parish. Invite families to gather for a special blessing. Arrange for sitters and let parents go on a date night. It can be free or used as a fundraiser for a shelter.
- ◆ Make Super Bowl Sunday a Souper Bowl of Caring Sunday by collecting a dollar in a soup pot from parishioners as they leave the church. Or ask parishioners to bring in a can of soup for the offertory. Deliver what is contributed to a local soup kitchen. Contact www.SouperBowl.org or 1-800-358-SOUP (7687) for materials.

SENDING FORTH AND CLOSING PRAYER

.The leader distributes the individually wrapped candies to each member with the instruction that members are to give it away within the week to someone they already love and someone with whom they are at odds.

When the candy has been distributed, the community prays as follows.)

All: God of love and compassion,
 You have showered us with love and asked us to do likewise.
 Be with us this week as we step out of our comfort zone
 to love those whom we have deemed unlovable,
 to love those who have hurt us,
 to speak up for those whose voices have been silenced.
 We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus, and by the power of
 the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Inviting members to join him/her in making the sign of the cross, the leader prays, “God [forehead] sends [heart] us [left shoulder] out [right shoulder]. All reply, “Amen”.)