



## Curative Love

Jeremiah 1:4-10 & 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Ordinary Time 4 - February 2, 2025

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I have a sermon that I traditionally deliver when the passage from First Corinthians is read. Of course, it is usually in the midst of a wedding ceremony, so it is not entirely appropriate here. Needless to say, this passage of scripture, so well-known and so oft heard, should not be reserved just for weddings. In fact, this passage of scripture speaks to us of not our love, but God's great love and how it ought to inform how we love others in this world.

Paul wrote to a church obsessed with the spiritual gifts that they have received. They prided themselves on ... well ... themselves and their own enjoyment of their gifts. Paul wrote offering not a denial of these gifts, but corrective that intimated that the love of God that animated their gifts was greater than any singular gift or their gifts in totality. Paul believed that love has the power and agency to form us to be the people that God would have us be and employ the gifts of God aright.

John Calvin had much to offer in his commentary on the passage. The great reformer was clear-sighted and on the mark with his analysis of human foibles:

**We are naturally too devoted to ourselves, and that fault makes us irritable and complaining. As a result what happens is that everyone wants other people to carry his burdens, at the same time refusing to assist them in any way.**

I think that Calvin stands head-and-shoulders above most analysts of the human condition. He perceived the plight of human existence and the central problem that blights the human experience correctly: we are so often too concerned with ourselves to see the plight of others and, we are so self-absorbed that even the beauty of our own lives as well escape us. Yet, Calvin was convinced that God, through the voice of Paul, offers us a solution. Here's the next part of Calvin's thoughts ... the part about love.

**Love is the cure for this disease, for love makes us servants to our brothers, and teaches us to carry their burdens on our shoulders. Again, because we are naturally malicious, we are also suspicious, and take the wrong meaning out of nearly everything. But love is calling us back to humanity so that we may think of others in a kindly and sincere way.**

Calvin was realistic in his description of the solution that the power of love offers us to turn away from ourselves and begin to see others as God perceives them.

We must admit that Calvin was right: our self-absorption tends to make us suspicious of others and their motivations and intent. We can become, if we neglect the gift and power of love, so self-focused that we believe that everyone else has the intention of only trying to put something over on us; that they are all out there trying to get our piece of the pie, so to speak. Calvin was convinced, following the lead of Paul, that love is the only power, the only cure for such dire views of humankind. And that

love has the power to restore us to what God would have us be – rather than self-focused, open towards others and willing to make room for others.

Flannery O’Conner, a writer in the Southern Gothic tradition, penned a story entitled, “Revelation,” which answers this very concern about the human race.

In the story, Ruby Turpin is a white Southern lady who, with her husband, has done all right in life. They have enough and as she constantly and consistently compares their state to others whom she sees, they have done better than a lot of folks.

The main action of the story unfurls in a doctor’s office waiting room, where Ruby is forced to sit and wait for her husband amidst a roomful of folks from all walks of life. She casts her eye about the room and sees folks that she refers to as “white trash.” She also shares the room with Black families, a particular point of disdain for her, as well as all the people who are there because they are ill. One particular college-aged girl has terrible acne-stains that do not escape Ruby’s disagreeable stare. In other words, she surveys the room, decides with confidence that God has made her better than everyone in it, and goes about mentally tallying up her score.

After a while, Ruby begins a conversation with a woman who she deems ‘acceptable.’ Though she tries to veil her comments, her disparaging remarks about the other inhabitants of the waiting room are overheard by the college-aged girl with the acne.

After having heard too much disdain-filled commentary about the people in the room, the girl picks up her textbook and heaves it at Ruby and then pounces on her screaming that unforgettable line: “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.”

Of course, this is not the cure for Ruby, but it is the start. Ruby Turpin won’t be cured until she learns of the love of God ... at this point in her life and in the story; Ruby believes that God’s love is for her and for her alone. This is not stated in the story, but it is implied in the character’s behavior and sometimes in our own: “God’s love is for us ... people like us ... people who act like we do, talk like we do, look like we do, think like we do, believe like we do ... etc.” When we think in such terms, as Ruby Turpin did, then we really are in need of a cure ... a deep and abiding cure. That cure is surely and certainly the love of God found in Jesus Christ.

The story ends with Ruby at home, contemplating a vision of heaven that includes those very people to which she feels superior: Blacks, white trash ... just about everybody but she and her husband. But then, at the end of the great parade into the heavenly gates, she envisions herself and those proper folks like her at least getting in last. No, Ruby Turpin has not been cured, but she’s on her way to redemption ... seeing that God’s love is not only greater than she could expect, but includes even her ... despite herself.

It is love that can cure our own well-developed or better-put, overly-developed and out-sized senses of self that get in the way of learning to care for others and share what God has given us. Love has the power to reclaim us and set us back upon a path that opens us to others in the way that God has intended for us. In the end, it is love that God uses, in Jesus Christ, to redeem us and the world – this then is the power of redeeming love.