

A Sermon by Muriel Lipp

January 31, 2016



Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

“Though I speak in the tongues of persons and of angels, if I have not love I am a noisy go on a clanging cymbal.” What a beautiful thought from St. Paul so long ago! And yes, then and now, are we gongs or clanging cymbals? Perhaps, if we do not use love as our primary language.

Even though we have just heard the reading of this Corinthian scripture, I’m going to repeat it. It is so beautiful and true, we might as well hear it twice.

“Love is patient and kind. It envies no one. Love is never boastful, rude, or conceited. It is not selfish you’re quick to take offense. Love keeps no score of wrongs. It doesn’t gloat over another’s sins. Love delights in the truth.” And then it ends with this: “Three things that last forever: faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love.”

I had a lot of love in my life: parents, brothers, a loving husband, neighbors, friends, children, and a church they taught me so much about love, including the intimacy of mission groups, retreats, and spiritual friendship.

The older I get the more I am convinced that loving one another is the greatest gift God, through Jesus, gave us. Love comes in so many forms: words, smiles, letters, emails, phone calls, gifts, time, money, transportation, prayers, and many other forms. Sometimes when I enter this building on Sunday morning and Kenny smiles at me, that feels like love, and it helps me to give love- smiles to others of you.

Prayer is also a good way of loving, maybe the best. I recently read a book by a nun, Melanie Svoboda, entitled *Traps of a Healthy Spirituality*. In it she mentions that she has kept file cards on prayer quotations. Here are four of them.

“ Pray as you can, and do not pray as you can't.”

“ God walks amid the pots and pans.”

This is by Teresa of Avila: “Of all the things we do, prayer is the least practical. We do not pray to get anything, we pray to love someone.”

This is by Thomas Keating: “The only way we can fail at prayer is not to show up.”

There is not one of us here today who has not experienced some pain and negativity in our lives. In the past few weeks some of you shared that pain with us right here at this pulpit. Even though I've had a lot of love in my life, I've also had pain. I had epileptic seizures early in my life, and later our family lost our only son by suicide, after years of depression. However both have been healed. The grief for our son has had a few miracles here and there, thanks to much love and sharing with groups.

Years ago when Seekers was still a young one, we had a group called “Wounded Healers.” It was a small group, and Emily Gilbert and I were part of it. Emily worked with eating disorders and massage. I, as a stabilized epileptic, lead a group of people with seizures. When we met as the Wounded Healers Mission Group, we shared our experiences. We prayed for those we felt called by God to be with, and for one another. We also exchanged ideas back-and-forth about how we could improve our work, how we could expand our love, the love that God gave us and expected us to use. Now I am inspired by other Seekers mission groups. Just recently we heard stories and songs from Bokamoso, the group of young people from South Africa. I'm always moved by those of you who have worked with them over the years. You were certainly not sounding gongs or clanging symbols.

When I was a member of Wounded Healers, I chose epilepsy as a focus for my loving another. Strangely, although I'd had epileptic seizures off and on during my youth they went away when I began to have children. “A miracle!” I thought because I had feared what could happen to a child when the mother had a seizure. Did God want me to have children and to remain seizure-free all these years of my life?

So my call in Wounded Healers was to people with epilepsy. I met a young woman who had more frequent and more serious seizures than I had. She couldn't read, and a teacher I knew asked me if I could work with this young woman, maybe teach her to read.

We met weekly in a center dedicated to people with serious learning and other disabilities. I failed to teach her to read, but she didn't fail in loving me, or I her. We remained friends for many years. Although she is too far away for me to visit her anymore, she still calls me and tells me she loves me. I think that she is just as much a healer as I am, maybe more.

I think this is a fine example what happens when we set out to love person or a cause. Love bounces back on the one who thinks she is in charge of the loving. I have gotten so much from Penny (that is her name), that I have no question that she is a gift from God from for me. It is amazing to me that God often comes to us through the darkness of our lives.

Think of all the people that you tried to help. Haven't they also helped you? That is God at work. Think of it as Jeremiah does: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you altogether." Each one of us is a miracle. Sure we have all sinned, but God is alive and well in us. What a beautiful mystery!

With the coming of the patriarchal church, healing as a practice of the community began to disappear. In some parts of the church it was seen as the demonic. Augustine and Aquinas accepted it late in life wife, and Luther disapproved of its practice during the main part of his ministry, only to accept it later. George Fox, of the Quakers, wrote a book about miracles, and there was some experimenting with healing in the Quaker communities. In fact, some of the so-called witches in New England, who were killed for their demonic activities, were actually Quaker women practicing the art of healing. John Wesley had some healing experiences, and Mary Baker Eddy's Church of Christ Scientist had Christian healing at its very core.

At Pentecost Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit. This was a mysterious gift of love that could do all things. Jesus meant for us, his followers, to mediate his love, blind wounds, heal the broken-hearted. First we were to receive this love ourselves, and then pass it around. But the early church waited for Jesus to come back and do it for them. We modern Christians, I hope are in the process of learning.

Being the age that I am and living with others of the same age, we all think about the next stage of our lives, which is passing over into a mysterious new world that we envision, but know nothing about. I do have faith that the same God who loved us in our mother's wombs will also love us in this passing. (And I much prefer the word

“passing” to that deadly word “death.”) God is love and will continue to be love. I expect that it will be a pleasant surprise. Will we meet our loved ones? Or we enjoy in an eternal banquet? Or will we be womblings, ready to be born again into a new life? The only thing we know is that God is love, and love is God.

Amen.