

JEREMIAH 1:4-10
PSALM 71:1-6
I CORINTHIANS 13:1-13
LUKE 4:21-30

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 30, 2022; Year C

Loving Wastefully! Wastefully Loving!
**A sermon honoring the memory and dedicated
to the legacy of Bishop John Shelby Spong.**

“Love wastefully!” Those will forever be the most memorable, most notable among many immortal words associated with the late Bishop of Newark, John Shelby Spong, one of my mentors and definitely someone I consider a patron saint. Yes, this sermon honors his memory and is dedicated to the monumental ecclesial and theological legacy that he left to the liberal leanings of Christendom, this towering figure who was a cornerstone in the foundational work framing the paradigms undergirding the ecclesiological and theological precepts articulated as progressive Christianity. So, just what does it mean to “love wastefully, to “wastefully love?” The phrase has a certain exotic sound, elusive yet alluring, even a touch intoxicating in so many ways, an appealing ideal that surely seems to capture the essence of the gospel, yes, the good news, the good news according to Jesus, a loving word encapsulating the very embodiment of the person of Jesus who was the ultimate illustrative example of what it means to be a completely and totally loving human being, no exceptions, no distractions, qualifications, no equivocations. Yes, Jesus possessed that oversized capacity, the bandwidth to embody and express perfect love! As we are prone to say, Jesus’ set an extremely radical example for us to follow, setting the bar very high, the standard to which we are all called to aspire, knowing we will never come close, but will routinely, by and large, come up terribly, tremendously, short, but oh what a ride, oh what a journey! Yes, Jesus is our guide,

our mentor and model as well as our loving brother and friend, spiritual colleague, an endearing sibling who loves us unconditionally and expects us to go and do likewise. Yes, he taught us well, teaching us, equipping us, and admonishing us, all of which allows us to show overflowing cups of extravagant grace, mercy, and peace toward one another and to those we know as the other, in turn fully loving every person, the biblical equivalent of our neighbor and that indeed means each and every child of God, all created as children of God, created in the divine image. It is the ultimate example of radical hospitality! It is why the United Church of Christ proudly proclaims that “no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey you are welcome here!” It is a statement of unqualified, unconditional love! **No ifs, no ands, no buts! Every time! All the time!**

Not so ironic, but very interesting, every three years we read Paul’s eloquent language of love in his letter to the church at Corinth, an epistle describing in flowery detail, using the most creative of adjectives, incorporating a host of synonyms—oh, how I love this narrative—employing his best poetically infused prose, the most provocative imagery any suitor would be proud to steal, plagiarizing in every way, eloquently reciting in their perpetual pursuit of a lover. I use the word ironic because if those magical, mystical lectionary editors who arranged and compiled the four readings in our three-year cycle of lections had cared anything about the secular calendar, specifically what we call the Hallmark calendar, then this epic description of love would have been delayed a couple of weeks, reserved for Valentine’s Day, that day I have usually hated more than appreciated! It’s the most hideous day of the year! But I digress; I often do! I guess in their own way, all of Paul’s epistles to various churches counted as love letters, even when they sometimes held a high degree of rebuke and scolding.

So today, thanks to those framers of these sacred lectionary offerings, our chosen readings give us a jump on this matter-of-the-heart

holiday now on the horizon. For some of you, perhaps this is a not-so-subtle reminder, a warning, that you may have some shopping to do, some unattended business. Just a heads up! You can thank me later if you think you might possibly would have forgotten! And with all that being said we are now ready to dive into Paul's soliloquy of love. Let's take a journey together as we are challenged to get into the mind of this apparently conflicted Apostle, seeking to unlock this loving part of his wonderfully appealing and graciously ingratiating story, the musings of someone whose personality oftentimes comes across as rough-edged and hard-nosed, a curmudgeonly stickler or a fuddy-duddy, an apostle who seems for the most part to lack a softer side because of his incessant nagging and constant warnings, even when offering his valuable sage advice, practical ecclesial and theological wisdom belying the harsh views of a former Pharisee who, once you get to know him, was obviously a kinder and gentler spirit. Paul reminds me somewhat of the epitome of the stereotypical schoolmarm, a caricature of a grumpy old man, always obsessing, always in condemnatory, corrective mode. Yes, today's Pauline version exposes a side of someone I think I would enjoy getting to know, perhaps sharing a brew, hanging out, perhaps even coming to a place of not just liking him but even loving this complex man of mystery and intrigue! And with that, we are off and running today.

Returning to Jack Spong's focus on wasteful love or loving wastefully, progressive preacher extraordinaire, the Rev. Deshna Shine, while noting that this is one of her favorite teachings by the late good bishop—as it is of mine, being a true disciple, even somewhat of a groupie—she encapsulates Spong's profound and provocative trinity of thought as I am prone to call it, call it a trifecta or trilogy of consciousness. Shine indeed captures the essence of the thought processes, that despite the human frailties that accompany us all, was a deeply spiritual man. Shine magnificently paraphrases Spong's three-fold theory most notably found in his cutting-edge book, *Jesus*

for the Non-Religious, beautifully stating, “If God is the source of life, as I believe God is, then . . . God is present in you, and me, and in the whole created order. And if God is the source of life, then the only way you worship God is by living. Living fully. Sharing life, giving life away, not being afraid, wandering out of the certain into the uncertain, out of (the) known into the unknown.” Spong adds, “If God is the source of love, as I believe God is, then the only way you can worship God is by loving. Not by being right, but by loving. By loving wastefully. The image in my mind is an old sink in the basement, that you plug up the drains and you turn on all the [taps] and the water overflows the boundaries and goes all over the floor and fills up every crack and cranny . . . You love because love is what you have to do—I would add want to do at this point—not because somebody deserves the love. You love wastefully.” Spong then asserts, “If God is the ground of being, as I believe God is, then the only way you and I can worship God is by having the courage to be all that we can be, in the infinite variety of our humanity. Whether we or male or female, gay or straight, transgender or bisexual, white or black or yellow or brown, left-handed or right-handed, brilliant or not quite so brilliant. No matter what the human difference is, you have something to offer in your own being. Nobody else can offer what you have to offer, and the only way you can worship God is by daring to be all that you can be, and not be bound by the fears of yesterday.” At Spong’s final lecture series, held at Chautauqua Institution in New York state in 2018, Chautauqua a conference center on steroids, an event I had the fortunate privilege of attending, Spong described his idea of wasteful love this way, “I mean the kind of love that never stops to calculate, never stops to wonder whether the object of its love is worthy to its recipient. It is love that loves not because it has been earned. That’s where I think God is made visible.” Elsewhere he declares in regard to our limited, finite, capacity to worship that we can only authentically, genuinely do so when we dare “be all that we can be,” all that we are created to be, never “bound by the fears of yesterday.” Spong

proposes, “suppose we change our God definition. Suppose we take God out of the sky . . . and suppose we begin to think of God as a presence at the very heart of life. . . .” **Folks, in my estimation these guiding principles form and frame the best, most complete, meaning of incarnation, call it incarnation of love or perhaps incarnational love. I imagine incarnation with a lower case “i”, declaring that God is present, an acknowledgment that the Holy and still speaking Spirit is alive and well, living and loving in each and every one of us. The Spirit breathes with us and within us, inhaling and exhaling with every breath we take. Incarnation was never intended to be a one-off, a one-and-done, a one-time event manifest only, solely, entirely, reserved alone for the person of Jesus. Incarnation is the reminder and reality that God-presence, made visible in God’s love, can be experienced by all of us in the here and now.** And we experience both incarnation and worship, when we approach God and one another honestly, in spirit and in truth, and with deepest integrity, when we are loving in all the many ways that love is manifest in the world and yes, experienced by the human. There is no other way. Perhaps that is why, in the middle of Paul’s linguistic monologue on love, he reminds his reader that all these mysteries we see through a dim mirror, a dark glass, or a “glass darkly” to use the King James Version of this pivotal and intuitive phrase. Maybe it is a lot like a fun house, carnival mirror, every image distorted and unclear. Paul’s mirror imagery is a reminder that love, just like God, is mystery, always mystery, mystery wrapped in enigma, for God and love are inseparable, synonymous, two sides of the same coin, yes, of the same substance.

In the Greek New Testament, what I prefer to call the Christian scriptures, we find three, some would argue for four, different kinds of love, each describing a different way of being loving. Forgive me if this is redundant for any of you, but I want to make sure everyone stays with me. I tend to not like to do word studies in my preaching because the study of word etymology is a wonderful sleep aid, dry

and boring, devolving into way too much minutiae! The kinds of love we are exploring include: *eros*, from which we get the word erotic, and is descriptive of romantic love, sexual desire, physical attraction, and physical love, derived from the mythological Greek god of love; the lesser known, somewhat obscure, kind is called *storge*, and describes family love, “the affectionate bond that develops naturally between parents and children, and brothers and sisters;” the next kind is *philia*, which is a type of intimate love practiced in Christian fellowship, beloved faith community, and that of close friendships, that of a trusted confidant; and, finally, *agape*, the kind of love Paul employs here in I Corinthians. This is supposedly the highest form of love because it is associated with divine love, the love that God inherently has for us and, most importantly, desires from us in return. It is perfect and unconditional, sacrificial, and pure.

Now that we are up to speed I can proceed! The problem, as I see it, in understanding the different manifestations of these seemingly distinct and divergent types of love is that they are always defined and discussed separately, in terms of their differences, even discussed as incongruent entities, compartmentalized as independent ideas, assuming no connectivity or commonality, devoid of any overlap, synthesis, or comprehensively holistic understanding. As you can tell from my critique, I do not see this approach as a good or helpful thing. It seems to me that in our understanding of what it means to worship God and to love God, two inseparable, intersecting responses, invoking Spong’s insightful imagery, his profound perspective, is that this response calls forth from us the full engagement and embrace of each one of these types of love, that all of them are necessary, each one a major part of a larger whole. In my mind they are inseparable and must all be combined, synthesized, and incorporated into our being, galvanizing our pursuit of a holistically loving life. All together, these unique aspects of love are intrinsic to, inherent in, our humanity, part and parcel of our very nature, exactly who we were all

created to be, informing and impacting all our relationships as we strive to love God, neighbor, and self, fulfilling that beautiful trifold imagery proclaimed by the prophet Micah who urges us, persuades, and pleads with us to embody three sacred tasks, to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God!” This is my sermon in a nutshell! You can do none of those sacrificial acts if you are not loving, if you are not a loving person, if loving is not intrinsic to, inherent in your very being, innate within your very spirit, deeply defining your very soul. If you yourself are not the very essence of love, the very embodiment of love, loving as one with all your being, dare I say the very epitome of love incarnate, then you have missed God’s mark, veered way off course. And yes, therein is the true definition of incarnation, that God’s love saturates us, permeates our being, fills us to overflowing, beyond capacity, with the still speaking Spirit of the Holy, yes, imbued with holiness, a spark of divinity, yes, housing the very essence of divine presence. Frankly, it was this deepest level of love and loving that separated Jesus from the herd, from everyone within his sphere of being, and that would include the likes of you and me if he were physically present in our midst today. It was not only that he revealed the very essence and presence of God, indeed an incarnational reality, but he made manifest in the world exactly what the love of God looked like and behaved like, yes, completely and totally as the love of God could be expressed and is! Yes, it is a very high bar, a most daunting proposition! But the method to Jesus’ madness enabled him to completely love God, his neighbor, and himself. It sounds so simple, so simplistic, the easiest thing to do. And yet experience has painfully, poignantly, taught us that at the least it is a tall order for the best of us, for all of us, but very manageable, very doable indeed if we can somehow, being nudged, led by the Spirit, balancing the significant dichotomies, the polarities between the seemingly impossible and the ability to even remotely find ways to follow his lead, to follow in his precious footsteps!

Today we are living in a world, and yes, closer to home, in a nation, that is sorely lacking in love. I need not take the time nor exert the energy to do a recall of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "let me count the ways," because you are all well aware. You see it every day on the nightly news, dreadful images of hatred that are reinforced and unfortunately made normative for our society, civil discord taken to new heights of vulgarity, seemingly becoming a perverse art form, far worse than any imaginative pornography. In recent years it seems to be in vogue, the "in" thing, to revel in hate speech and even worse, manifest as action, in violence, prejudice unbound, fueled by racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia, and every other "ism" and "phobia" imaginable, all of it running rampant, unabated and frequently unchecked, much of it mostly led by white supremacists who perfectly model hatred, what an odd use of that word in this context, and revel in its aftermath, swearing they love Jesus but who do not seem to know who he was, and is, or anything about him, knowing absolutely nothing about his person, not even remotely so. The historical Jesus is a stranger to them, an anomaly, obviously a counterintuitive person in their perversely twisted minds. After all Jesus was a peacenik, a peacemaker on steroids, exhibiting and illustrating love in every way imaginable, yes, including the scriptural varieties of eros, storge, agape, and philia, all working in harmony to make for a most perfectly loving individual seeking and striving to create loving human creatures and loving communities, yes, including beloved faith communities. That, my friends, was Jesus. What we have learned during these trying times is that love is love! Period! End of discussion! Game! Set! Match! Unfortunately, we have also learned that "hate is hate," so said Jonathan Greenblatt, the head of the Antidefamation League just this week. And while I am on the subject and on a bit of a rant, ironically it is these same white supremacists who are not only antisemitic but seem to conveniently have amnesia about Jesus' true, authentic, self, his real racial and national identity, forgetting that Jesus was Jewish, that he was a Jew! Go figure! And there is a long history with this ever-

trending, constant nonsense, the Holocaust the ultimate evil perpetuated because of this unforgivable demonic oversight. I have never been able to make sense of this paradox, claiming to be a Christian while burning a cross in someone's yard, denying the very race and nationality of the one they ironically swear fealty, claiming their unwavering and ultimate allegiance. I guess some things were just not made to make sense!

The self-appointed apostle, this great epistle writer, composer extraordinaire, despite being overwhelmed by physical, and no doubt emotional, mental, and spiritual challenges, including his mysteriously unnamed thorn in the flesh—inquiring, curious, minds desperately want to know—often driving what we might call the hyper-negativity that seemed to follow him, to haunt him, to dominate and overwhelm his writings, Paul somehow managed to overcome all these negative temptations. If even for the briefest moment of clarity, Paul was able to invoke with the greatest sobriety, if only a blip on his intentionally, myopically, focused radar, gathering all the necessary grace to allow him to see his way clear to see, the Spirit empowering him to see with crystal clarity the light and love of Christ shining upon him and his dark world. All this sensory awareness enabled the Apostle to see through the darkness, setting his soul free, even emboldening him to write some of the most beautiful prose ever written. Out of the mouth of a former Pharisee who once gleefully persecuted Jesus' followers, torturing and terrorizing, murdering these innocent and helpless Christians in defense of the old-time religion he believed with all his heart, mind, and soul was being vulnerably compromised and threatened all because of a personal and communal paranoia and insecurity, obsessively driven by anxiety and fear! Paul never hid his contempt of those he thought were his adversaries, heretical, apostate, those wrongfully perceived as enemies of God! Yes, the very thing the Romans would soon be guilty of copying! Wow! What conversion! To use some words of Michael Jackson and Paul

McCartney, Paul the Apostle became a lover, not a fighter! No bad for a former hater! Paul's words, even without considering his radical transformation, constitute the most eloquent poetry, a narrative soliloquy that became a part of the Canon of scripture, our Bible, poetic language that has easily stood and transcended the test of time, as timely now as it was on the day it was written. That is why we continue to hear it read ad nauseum at weddings! Let me count the ways! Paul's words are a reminder, that at the depth, at the very core, of our being, we long to love, we really are programmed to be loving despite the challenges that interfere with our resolve and hinder our best efforts, deterring our desire to be loving and in love, and of course, allowing ourselves to be loved, fully and completely, authentically, loved. And yes, that includes the myriad ways, at least four according to the Christian scriptures, we are called to love as human beings and doings, imbued with the divine imprimatur, stamped with the very love of God! It should come naturally to all of us even when it does not! In fact, my guess is that those who fail to love, those who cannot fall in love in all the ways that love can manifest itself in our lives, have sadly never been loved and have never felt loved, experiencing the wonderful and intoxicating power of love! It is an unfortunate possibility! Just a hunch! Paul's language is so clear that to even try and do any interpretation, sermonic or didactic, cheapens, trivializes, any and every aspect of this creatively imaginative language, words that compose, that form and frame the most beautiful vocabulary, love, a vernacular all its own. Paul's provocatively creative love song, this lyrical sonnet, even with its thoughtful imagination, is verbiage that still managed to maintain a plainly spoken, crystal clear message, surely of God, this text certainly qualifying as word of God if any of this biblical stuff can be regarded as even remotely divinely inspired composition.

Listen again to Paul's love song! "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging

symbol. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand and all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. 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 truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Love never ends . . . And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” Yes, love is love! Love is always love! Love is always loving! God is love! Love is God! And seeing as how we are the created image of God, yes, we, therefore love and God is not only in our very DNA but is our DNA! Anything less and we, ironically, are being less, become less, than human, settling for much less, failing to embrace the divine spark of love within us, always empowering us! Go, and be in love, with God and neighbor and self, yes, loving all, all creatures great and small!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and who calls us to keep on loving! Amen and amen!

