

Epiphany 4, Year C

- Old Testament reading this morning is an absolute classic, and I have to say it's one of my wife's favorite lessons in Scripture
- She loves it so much that I offered to let her preach on it, since I knew she would be back from the youth lock-in at the Cathedral in St. Louis that was on Friday night – but for some strange reason she didn't think that she'd enjoy preaching the same weekend as a lock-in, I don't really know why
- But it's the story of the call of Jeremiah, an absolutely classic passage of Scripture, and an extremely popular one – though its popularity is nothing, I have to admit, when compared to our epistle, the famous 13th chapter of the first letter to Corinth – I'd be willing to bet if you asked around, there are a number of Christians who think a marriage is not valid if that particular epistle is not read during the ceremony
- And at first glance these two readings may not seem to have a lot in common – the call of Jeremiah and Paul's discussion on love – after all, they were written at two very different times to two very different sets of circumstances – but I think they ultimately speak to the exact same problem, and it's one that most of us either have now or have had at some point in the past
- This problem is the one that, more than any other, seems to be the most upsetting about the world today – the question that plagues us when we survey the world as it stands and how far removed it seems from the kingdom of God – a seemingly simple question with so many answers that it can paralyze us: “where do we even begin?”
- That's a question that I imagine lies underneath Jeremiah's protest when the word of the Lord comes to him in the story of his call to become a prophet of God
- Jeremiah, of course, lives in a time when God's people are being unfaithful, and foreign empires are looming – Jeremiah comes to be known as the “weeping prophet” for all of his sadness at the fate that he knows is coming because of everything going wrong, going contrary to God's plans for the world
- And it's interesting, I think, that for Jeremiah's call, it begins not with God's task for Jeremiah, not with the work Jeremiah is to do, but a statement of God's familiarity, God's intimacy:
- "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."
- In other words, God says, **I know you**, have always known you, and you were made for

this work that I am about to set before you

- But that doesn't stop Jeremiah's protests, does it?
- "Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."
- Even after hearing how intimately and how well God knows him, after hearing how God made him for this work, Jeremiah still isn't sure – still doesn't trust himself enough, still worries that he isn't equipped, isn't cut out for this
- Like Jeremiah, I think we can be quite good at selling ourselves short
- Like Jeremiah, I think we can forget that God knows us, has always known us, and that God has made us for the work that is set before us
- Like Jeremiah, I think for us the question of where to begin can be a daunting one
- Paul isn't addressing that same question directly when he writes his first letter to the church at Corinth, but I think it lies beneath this passage, too
- Of course, we're used to thinking about this passage in terms of weddings, in terms of romantic love, in terms of how all that matters is finding the love of your life
- And it's good to hear this passage in that setting, don't get me wrong, but it's not really what Paul is talking about at all
- That's much clearer if you read it in the context of the whole letter – and if you've been to church the past two weeks, you have a little bit of that context to lean on – but don't worry, I have promised never to give pop quizzes on the readings
- But the past two weeks, we've heard lengthy passages from 1 Cor 12 about how we're all members of the same body, about how we all have different gifts – about how God has designed us all differently from one another, in other words, for the good of each other and for the world
- And it's in that context, of talking about the gifts we've all been given, that Paul goes on this extended meditation about the importance of love
- And when he begins, he even compares love to some of the gifts he's mentioned in the previous chapter: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love," he says, "I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." – "If I have prophetic powers, and understand 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."
- Of all the gifts that Paul mentions, all the gifts that Paul says God bestows on us for the good of each other and the world, of all those gifts, he says, love is without a doubt the

most important

- And here, it's worth saying, "gifts" is not just a euphemism, not just a way of talking about things we do well – it's a recognition first and foremost that God is the source of our talents and abilities – like Jeremiah, God knew us even before forming us in the womb, knew our likes and dislikes, our talents and shortcomings – knew us deeply
- God designed us for a purpose – gave us all gifts for a purpose
- But no ability, no gift from God, is greater than the gift of love
- God has given us that gift for us, and God has given us that gift for us to share
- We all have been given the gift that is above all other spiritual gifts: gift of love – God's love for us and the love that, because of that, we're able to extend to one another
- We are capable of love only because God knows us first, loves us first
- You don't have to look hard to know how desperately the world needs that gift, and how it needs it far more than it needs anything else
- If you aren't sure where to begin, then think of the ways God has made you, the gifts God has given you, even the things that give you joy
- Frederick Buechner once said that the place we're called to is where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet
- Our call may not be as clear as Jeremiah's – we don't always hear the voice of God speaking directly to us in some unmistakable revelation
- But rest assured, God knows you, has always known you
- And when you see the world around us, the world in need, then regardless of youth, inexperience, discomfort – regardless of whether or not you think you even know what to say, or where to begin – rest assured that God has a plan for you – God intends to use you for the life of the world and for the good of God's kingdom
- And if you know all that, but still aren't sure where to begin?
- Above all, begin with love