
Why I Love the Church, Anyway

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Epiphany 4 – Year B

I'm pretty invested in this thing we call church, as you may have guessed. Perhaps because I've encountered God in some of the most glorious ways through church: around a campfire on youth retreats, at the candlelight service on Christmas Eve, serving as a lay chalice bearer, sharing spiritual autobiographies in EfM. Or when, on one of my first Sundays as a priest here, I spilled red wine all over our white altar linens, and still had a job the next week. And what's more, the altar guild would still speak to me! Yes, I've experienced a lot of grace and beauty and joy in the church, here and elsewhere.

But I've experienced many other things in church, too. I've been left out, misunderstood, rejected. I've had my toes stepped on, and I've stepped on plenty of toes myself. I've sat through my fair-share of committee meetings—including some long, uncomfortable, contentious ones. I know you have, too; so you know that behind every glorious worship service, or every ministry here, there is a group of people working it out—figuring out how to work together—behind the scenes. That's a big part of what we do as church.

On a more somber note, when I began teaching theology at a women's prison and participating in a worship service there, I began to get a sense for how many people have been really hurt by Christian communities. I met women who had been excluded or condemned because of their sexuality or their struggles with addiction; or because they left an abusive or harmful marriage; or because of the stigma of crime or incarceration. And yet, to their credit, here they were, in this theology class or in this circle, seeking healing and understanding and a different way to be, together.

I don't need to tell you that the church is flawed. You all know that. It's not a perfect institution; it never has been. Just look at the Bible! The disciples argue among themselves about who's the greatest, with Jesus standing right there! Barnabas and Paul part ways in the middle of a missionary trip over a disagreement. Paul and Peter get into it in front of all the leaders of the church in Antioch. Behind many of the New Testament epistles are churches dealing with conflict, hypocrisy, false teachings, toxic behaviors. Like the church in Corinth.

Barely twenty years after Christ's ascension, the Corinthian congregation is being torn apart by rivalry, pride, envy. They're fighting over who has the greatest spiritual gifts, bringing their social divisions into the church, and leaving each other out at communion. They disagree about how they should live as Christians, and they're stepping on each other's toes left and right. And this—*this* struggling, fractious church—is the context for Paul's famous words about love, words that we often hear at weddings, and for good reason!

These words take on even more meaning when we remember that Paul didn't write them for two individuals at the romantic, exciting beginning of their life together, but for a Christian community in the middle of it—when the honeymoon is long over, and they're getting on each other's nerves, and wondering where they went wrong and whether they should just give up altogether.

For Paul, this isn't a sign of failure. For Paul, this is when it starts to get real. This is an opportunity for real growth—an opportunity to learn and practice the love they talk so much about. For Paul, it's in this real, imperfect community, and in their real, imperfect relationships with real, imperfect people, that they get down to the real work of love. Of steadfast,

gritty love.

Remember that Paul didn't invent this understanding of steadfast love himself. It's the love that God has shown God's people, over and over, especially in Jesus Christ. Love that is humble and persistent and vulnerable. Hopeful and faithful.

This love—Christ's love—is what makes church distinctive. Of course, we learn and practice love in all our relationships and communities. But here, that practice is grounded in and shaped by Christ's love for us and for all people. That doesn't mean that we get it right any more than anyone else. But when we don't, we remember Christ's love, and we confess and repent and keep trying.

This work, or practice, of love doesn't stop here; the church doesn't exist for itself. As Christ gave himself for us, we, the church, give ourselves for the world. And we bear witness in the world to the love we've experienced from God and are learning with one another.

Witness. Sometimes, it seems that Christians think witnessing means coming at people from a holier-than-thou position and telling them what they should think and how they should live—which usually means, “Think and act like I do!” But I wonder if it wouldn't be a more powerful and honest witness to come at it with more humility: to admit that we ourselves are still learning how to love and to let ourselves be loved. That we're still learning how to welcome and trust and forgive and reconcile. That *that* is why we do church!

This really hit me last Sunday at the Cathedral's first Dinner with Friends, a meal and facilitated conversation about race. I've never been very comfortable talking about race—at least, not in an honest and vulnerable way. Sure, it's easy to preach about how bad racism is, and to call out *other* people for their prejudice. But it's not so easy to talk about my own. It's not so easy to talk about the times when I've been confronted by my own implicit biases, or made snap judgments or assumptions based on something like skin color. It's not so easy to acknowledge the many ways I benefit from this construct of whiteness or the ways I may be attached to those privileges.

Yet I'm coming to believe more and more that there's where real transformation begins: not with those people out there who are doing it all wrong, but here in my heart, and here in this church.

So, last Sunday, I entered, timidly, into this difficult conversation with people who had all kinds of different experiences around race. We risked asking questions, making mistakes, speaking our truths, sharing our stories—including the stories that didn't make us look good.

Now, I know that this was just a beginning—a drop in the bucket. But it felt really important at the same time. This awkward conversation felt like a practice in love, and an expression of hope, and an act of resistance—resistance to the politicized, either-or rhetoric swirling all around us. It felt like the kind of witness that we in the church are particularly suited to: coming together when so many forces would pull us apart; approaching one another with humility and curiosity; staying in conversation when it gets awkward or hard; stubbornly hoping in and working toward healing and wholeness.

This is why I love the church. Not because it perfectly embodies Christ's values, or because we who gather here have all the answers, but because we don't, and we know it. And we seek to walk in love—to *learn* to walk in love—anyway, as Christ loved us, for the sake of the world.