

Love Takes Practice [Or Mirabel: Truth-Telling Saves the Miracle]

Luke 4:21-30 and 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on January 30, 2022

Mirabel had a problem. The Madrigals, Mirabel's family in the animated movie *Encanto*, were so focused on protecting their home that they struggled to tell the truth about their challenges. Challenges big and small that meant the Madrigals weren't perfect. Mirabel could see the problem. She could see that the family was struggling. She could see that their house, in which they all lived as one big generational family, was cracking under the pressure of this really big problem that no one would talk about. Luisa wasn't as strong as everyone thought. Abuela wasn't as certain. And Bruno's visions of the truth were such a threat that he left the family, and no one talked about Bruno – no, no, no. The Madrigals story is an allegory about the pressures that immigrants face to excel and be perfect so that they can keep their new homes. Their story also applies to families more generally – who gets to speak, who gets heard, and how the truth is told or not told. While Bruno was the one with the visions, Mirabel ended up being the truth-teller. Even her Abuela, her grandmother, finally listens to her but it was a tough sell. Mirabel paid a heavy price for being the Madrigals' truth-teller.

Truth-teller is another word for prophet. Biblical prophecy is more about truth-telling, God's truth in particular, and not about seeing the future. Jesus knew this when he said to his friends and family in Nazareth, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." Truth-tellers often bear the burden of push-back from people who don't want to hear it, or in Jesus' case, the threat of being pushed off a cliff. We heard the first part of Jesus' story in the Nazarene synagogue last week when his friends and family were amazed to hear Jesus' words and celebrated his teaching. Oh, how quickly the tide turned against him because he then said something they were not ready to hear. He changed gears on them, flipped the script, inverted the priorities (as Pastor Ann preached about last week). Jesus turned their expectations of him upside down and they were furious. Their rage had them ready to commit murder, to kill Jesus by hurling him off a cliff. The story is not clear how, "But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way." Truth-tellers attract painful encounters because people will go to great lengths to avoid and push-back at the truth.

One trick about telling the truth is not being a jerk about it. Part of Mirabel's effectiveness in the movie story is how much she loves her family. Her love for them and their love for each other made space for the truth. Each member of the

Madrigal family has a gift, even Mirabel. Their gifts each serve a greater purpose in the story than they're able to see at the beginning. It becomes a story wider than just their family and greater than only saving their home. It kind of makes you wonder if the movie writers knew Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Tucked in the middle of Paul's teaching about spiritual gifts in chapters 12 and 14, is this stunning section about love in chapter 13 - one of the most well-known parts of scripture because it's often chosen as a reading at weddings. But Paul isn't preaching at a wedding, he is writing to the church in Corinth. This Corinthian church had been arguing among themselves about all kinds of things, setting up hierarchies of leadership, gifts, and insiders and outsiders. Paul's letter opens in gratitude for these wayward, faithful people and then unfolds a counter proposal to these hierarchies and their behavior around them. By nesting the love chapter within the gifts, Paul points to love as the reason for the gifts. Love is THE gift, the greatest of all. The gifts point to love. To paraphrase Paul, if I sing like an angel but without love, I'm just making noise; if I can solve every mystery and have oodles of faith but no love, it amounts to nothing; and if I give everything I own away without love, nothing is gained.

Love is as counter cultural as it gets right now in the United States – especially in public. It's like there's a \$100 million dollar contest for who can be the meanest and most self-absorbed. It doesn't help that most of our news sources dust up as much controversy as possible because there's a very human inclination to find out what the fuss is about. And a riled-up, hateful community is more profitable than a calm, loving one. The algorithms, and the artificial intelligence behind the algorithms, lead us to topics that we're already inclined to believe based on the choices we've been making, funneling us to ever more polarizing and agitating content. Here's the thing. If we practice anger, we're going to get really good at anger. Same thing with envy and arrogance. Want to be the best at being rude? Keep being rude. We're not complicated creatures. We tend to do what we practice doing. Paul called his church folks to practice love based on Christ's example because what they'd been doing was taking them down the wrong road. We've seen what it looks like when spiritual gifts are used to manipulate people. Charisma without love can rob people blind. It's more than noisy gongs and clanging symbols. It's dangerous. People will get hurt.¹

¹ Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. Dear Working Preacher: Staggering Love (re: 1 Corinthians 13). January 23, 2022. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/staggering-love>

Love is not 'going along to get along.' It's neither unity through muting differences, nor is it giving up on finding solutions to problems because it's too hard. Love means that each person is valuable. No one is expendable. Paul describes love as behavior. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love rejoices in the truth. Love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. Here's your homework for the week. Take home your bulletin. Read 1 Corinthians 13. Underline verses and make notes in the margins. What does love already look like in your life? How has who God created you to be, including your gifts, help point you to love? How can you practice love this week? Here's a pro-tip. Buy yourself time. Ask for time if the situation allows for it. Time between your first reaction to something and how you would respond in love. For some that means counting or praying in their heads. Others might set a timer on their phone. Others may take a literal time out and move to a different room or take a bathroom break. However you do it, make time between your instinctive reaction, the reaction that only you are privy to because it happens in your mind and body, and how you want to respond if love is indeed the greatest of all things. Our bodies can't go where our mind hasn't gone. Sometimes we must buy time for our minds to prioritize love before we can respond in love. It's a choice. Love takes practice.

We don't know what other people are going through. We can't know their whole situation. We see other people's situations dimly and see God even more dimly. Paul reminds us that someday we'll see God but, in the meantime, we are fully known by God. In the mess of who you actually are, God promises to love you no matter what. One of the things we do at church is practice God's love through Jesus, imitating it and reminding each other about it. We confess the truth of our flaws and fragility and hear God's love and forgiveness in return. We listen to scripture and the preacher's interpretation. We welcome children and listen to them. We share peace and then we share the communion meal to which everyone is invited, even the newest visitor among us may come to Christ's table of bread and wine. We sing in prayer and praise to God who knows us fully and has always loved us because God loves the world.

God loves us first. From God's promise of love, we're asked to practice God's love with each other, our neighbors and our enemies. A patient, kind, and truthful love that bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things - the greatest of all gifts indeed.