



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 4TH EPIPHANY
I CORINTHIANS 12:31B – 13:13
JANUARY 30, 2021

“IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE OUT THERE...?!”

Our men's bible study this past Thursday featured the story of writer for *New York* magazine, a self-described atheist. The death of her grandfather from Covid early in the pandemic, and more recently of a young friend in an accident, left her with an uneasiness she found difficult to describe. In the past year, she said she thought, perhaps a hundred times, that she should go to church. She'd been raised in a Christian home, so going to a worship service was not completely foreign to her.

But, as of the writing of her article, she hadn't even though the feelings inside her persisted. She said *“the universe, I decided, contained nothing but bright light and a vacuum of space. So why, after two years of plague, did I want to know if there is anything else.”* Is there anything else? Think about that for a minute... think about what you know that this earnest, intelligent, articulate author apparently does not!

Today is our annual meeting. We've things to talk about – things to recall with gratitude and our share of losses too – as with virtually every year. Cautiously we've laid plans to start some things up again in what we hope is a post-pandemic world. But if we have our meeting and do not, at least indirectly if not directly, talk about how our congregation conceives of and funds our ministries in order for us to be able to answer the question of this author – *“is there anything else”* and love people like this into the arms of Jesus, our annual meeting and monthly committee meetings will have missed a golden opportunity, missed the point, even been a waste of time.

I ask your prayers for our church council. Our leadership wants all our ministries this year to ask the question *“how will what we are doing enable us to reach people who are not believers.”* Our men's study this past week introduced us to person like a lot of persons in our culture - disaffected by the church, lured away from faith, or hostile to it. Lots of times that's because they have at best second or third hand knowledge of the Christian faith. The “Christian” box is checked far less frequently in surveys... the one checked, “regularly attend a religious service” means, to the checker, something somewhere between *“when I can and when I feel like it.”*

The author featured in our study said she'd been to lots of vigils and memorials recalling all the suffering and solemnizing it – most of it left her feeling unsatisfied. The blaming and fault finding and every now and then the callous, sinister pleasure expressed by some in the deaths of people who were public about their refusal to mask, distance or vaccinate, left her feeling there was something “demonic” in our culture. What was that you say? Is such a thing real...and if so, do we in the church know anyone who can do anything about it?

She wanted to mourn all the loss and isolation and *“banish the darkness gathering all around me”* but confessed the *“nearest comfort she found”* was people who listened to her but offered nothing else. She said *“I listened for the “still small voice of God...and heard nothing but shattering silence. “God may yet reveal himself to me...unless he does, all that waits for me in the dark is other people trying to find their way out.”* To such a person what can we say? What is the Lord's counsel to us? Through Jeremiah, God might say to his church, *“get yourself ready...stand up and say to them whatever I command you.”*

So, let us get ourselves ready to speak on God's behalf.

Jeremiah was called to speak to those who turned from the Lord, that is true. But Jeremiah's words seem almost too confrontational for our purposes today. Maybe not down the road, but for now at least. The church today feels little like *"a fortified city"* or an *"iron pillar."* Psalm 71 says the Lord is a *'rock of refuge'* – today's paraphrase of that Psalm calls God *"a hiding place."* That might be a better place to invite someone who feels *"helpless and bereft."*

If our foe is demonic however, and they are hardly *"helpless and bereft"* types searching in the darkness for light - then we need a demon slayer with the authority to say, *"come out of them...be silent and be gone."* Amen...come Lord Jesus! So, with authority...Jeremiah like authority at that, we must proclaim Jesus. But with what tone of voice?

To a world that asks, *"is anything out there"* we say Jesus is *"what's out there."* Jesus is the love of the invisible God in plain sight. Jesus is the *'still more excellent way'*! Most definitions of love in our culture, however, would leave a lot of the boxes of I Corinthians 13 unchecked.

T-shirts, bumper stickers, Facebook banners and loud, obnoxious tweets say, *"love is love"* and *"love wins."* But if it does then first of all it keeps quiet about itself...it has no time for pride, it shuns anger as a tactic, and it doesn't dig around in the past for wrongs. And that doesn't sound much at all like what passes for love these days!

It struck me how often the person whose story we heard in our men's study this week kept hearing *"maybe I should go back to church"* spoke of being in darkness...and knew no one who was ready to say *"come with me."* How wonderful if we the Lord's church, if we the members of this church, were ready, in the tone of *bearing, believing, enduring and hoping love* would be ready to answer *"is there anything out there"* questions with a definitive *"yes there is"* We believe that Jesus is our light and our life, though we confess that we see him now only dimly – for darkness disturbs our sight too...we see as though in a darkened mirror.

But to our church, come anyway...for we know one thing for certain, the day is coming when the knower those whom he fully knows, will be one. Until then, we'll follow Him and his *"most excellent way"* together. We'd love you to join us in that most wonderful, holy endeavor. AMEN