

Sermon Title: **“Justice Without Love?”**

Bible: **Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30; 1 Corinthians 13:1-3**

When: on the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany, February 2, 2025

Where: about 25 people (plus YouTube Live viewers) at Gilroy UMC

Opening Prayer

O Lord, let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

1. Prophets Vs. Pastors

As you may have guessed from the message title, today’s message can be very heavy for you and for me. If I could, I would rather avoid this message. As many of you know, I follow the lectionary readings for message themes, rather than choosing my own Bible passages. While I read today’s lectionary scripture readings again and again, I decided to use three passages, and to have this message title, “Justice Without Love?”

I opened this message with the prayer, “I hope that our message will be acceptable in the sight of our Lord, our Rock, our Redeemer, and our Refuge.” The reason why I say that this is OUR message, not my message, is that when I prepare the message, I always think of both the word of God—the Bible—and God’s beloved ones—each of you—in my brain, in my mind and heart, and in my body. Without God, I cannot be a pastor. In the same way, without you, the church, I cannot be a pastor. Are you ready for today’s heavy message?

I prepared some examples of this or that. Which one do you prefer, cats or dogs? Is there

anyone who loves both cats and dogs? Which one are you, left-handed or right-handed? Is it possible to use both hands equally? When we use a fork, or a knife, I see that each hand holds one utensil, but I do not see anyone who uses both hands to hold one utensil at the same time. Which one are you, task-oriented or relationship-oriented? If your pastor is relationship-oriented and very nice, and always says Yes to you, but if the church's ministry is not that fruitful, are you okay with that pastor? If your pastor is task-oriented and very effective for the ministries, but if the close relationship between you and a pastor is not built well, are you okay with that pastor? I am thinking of this question in terms of task-oriented or relationship-oriented. Do you think that I am task-oriented or relationship-oriented? Is there any possibility to be both task and relationship-oriented? For this question, my answer is that I would like to build a rapport like the one between a doctor and a patient. I would like to build a sacred trust between you and me for your whole health, including your spiritual health and growth, and for our church's health and growth. When we have rapport or sacred trust, we can say both Yes and No. We can share our weaknesses as well as strengths. We can give constructive feedback to each other, even if it can sound challenging and is not always good news. We do not see doctors to hear what we want to hear, right? Sometimes, doctors give us very honest results and advice for our health, which cannot be that pleasant to our ears. When I heard from the doctor that I need to exercise, eat more vegetables, and lose weight, it was not pleasant to my ears, but I know that it was recommended for my body and health. When my grandfather was sick with lung cancer, the doctor told my family that he did not have

anything more he could do for my grandfather, and my family needed to be ready for my grandfather's death. Definitely, it was not good news. Because of the rapport, my parents did not need to find a second opinion, and accepted it as it was.

Now, how about the message? And this is the last question regarding this or that. Which message do you prefer, a prophetic message or a pastoral message? Which message do I prefer, a prophetic message or a pastoral message? The prophetic message can be not only to build and plant, but also to destroy and overthrow, as we read in the book of Jeremiah. It can be good news, and it can also be unpleasant news. The prophets are not there to tell the future in advance, but to tell what God is calling us to do. So, the prophetic messages are powerful in many ways, even though we may not like them and even though I would like to avoid delivering those messages!

As we read in the Gospel of Luke, just like no prophet ever is welcomed in his or her hometown, many prophets are not welcomed. Even our Lord Jesus was not welcomed. Then, is there any possibility to have both prophetic and pastoral messages, at least in our church? Our Lord is God of love and justice. Can we talk justice and love together? Can we do actions for justice and love together, at least in our church? Is it possible?

2. Justice Without Love?

Our community and our society have become more polarized at many levels and in many ways. One of the biggest temptations is to think of many things as either right and wrong, and to think ourselves right and others wrong. It might mean doing what we think of as justice,

but without love. Then, as we read in 1 Corinthians 13, to the audience, it might sound like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. For example, when my mom told me something when I was young, I knew that it was meant for me, but it sounded like nagging to me, rather than giving me advice. Of course, I know that my mom loves me, and I am pretty sure that my mom is right, but I cannot accept all of what my mom says at first in my mind. And this is another example. When I took a bystander intervention training, I learned that I was very naive about helping others. When you see a person being harassed, what is the right thing to do? One thing I still remember is that to help that person immediately or to call the police is NOT helpful, which surprised me. Even though there is a definite need to help, bystanders should not intervene until the person asks for help. What bystanders can do is ALWAYS to ask if the person needs help or not. Only if the person asks for help, or agrees to be helped, can bystanders intervene. To follow what that person wants is the key, not to follow what I want and not to follow what I think is right. If we focus only on doing justice, it might not be helpful, because it blinds us to seeing others, who are also God's beloved ones, because there is a lack of love for others being demonstrated. How can we do justice with love?

3. Justice with Love?

When I became a Methodist in 2012, I was very proud of our denomination. That's because our church—our denomination—is big enough to welcome and include both George W. Bush and Hillary Clinton, even though they have different political views. Both are members of the United Methodist Church. I learned that Bush became a United Methodist after marrying his

wife Laura, a lifelong Methodist, in 1977. He was the chair of the United Methodist Men's group. Hillary is a lifelong Methodist, and I heard that she has been one of the speakers for nationwide United Methodist Women's gatherings. Bill Clinton accompanied his wife, Hillary, to services at a United Methodist Church, even though he is a Southern Baptist. Even though we are different, even though we have different political views, Republican, Democrat, or Independent, including me (who is not a US citizen yet), can we worship our Lord together, love each other, and do justice? I do not know if I am being too naive again. But at least, according to today's Scripture Readings, this is the message that I would like to share with you. It is not easy; it is difficult, but I believe that it is possible, because God is with each of you and me. We are a small church, but I believe that we are big enough. We can be a loving and just faith community, at least in our church together.

Instead of the closing prayer, I would like to close this message with the latter part of 1 Corinthians 13 that we have not read yet. Actually, the whole of chapter 13 is one of the lectionary readings:

“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; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.” Amen.