Sunday, January 29, 1995
OVERCOMING RESENTMENT
I Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Everyone has bad days. Some of our bad days have to do with minor irritations, and others with major ones. Minor irritations might be an unexplained pain in the stomach or some other part of the body; a teenager who stays out too late; a dead car battery on a cold morning when you are in a hurry; a misunderstanding with a relative or friend; a set of lost keys; someone being rude to you, and you responding in kind. There are so many little things in daily life that can frustrate us.

And then there are the major problems that cause bad days: an earthquake, fire, or tornado destroys your home; an auto accident in which someone is seriously injured or killed; a close friend or relative is diagnosed with a terminal illness; you lose your job; your spouse announces they are divorcing you. You look around and wonder why other people don't seem to have the problems you have, and the seed of resentment begins to grow.

A common illusion is that certain people — because of who they are and what they do — have fewer problems and are less prone to bad days than the rest of us: clergy, physicians, educators, and people who don't have to worry about money problems. Let me assure you, this is not true. No one is immune to everyday problems and frustrations. No one is immune from feelings of resentment.

One reason newspaper columnists like Andy Rooney are so popular is that they put into words what we've all felt and experienced. In one of Rooney's columns, he wrote: "There are few things in life you can depend on. It is common knowledge, for example, that any line you choose to stand in for anything will be the slowest one to move. At the bank, you get behind someone with a whole payroll to work out in pennies; at the supermarket, you choose the line in which people don't seem to have too much in their carts, but it turns out that two of the six people ahead of you have checks that take time to be validated…."

Each one of us has our own special reasons for bad days and for the resentment they can cause. One person said she's having a bad day when she feels fragmented and pulled in different directions by too many conflicting demands. Another connects bad days with having certain expectations and finding that he cannot meet them.

It always helps to have a sense of humor about bad days. I came across a list of items that warn you when you are going to have a bad day. You know it's going to be a bad day when your boss tells you not to take off your coat. You put both contact lenses in the same eye. You call your answering service, and it tells you it's none of your business. You are on a business trip, and you call back to your office and ask for yourself, and the receptionist tells you that they have no one working there with that name.

On a more serious note, a friend of mine knows he's going to have a bad day when that all-too-familiar needle-like pain twinges in his lower back. Another kidney stone is sure to be on its way down the urinary tract, the culprit in many emergency trips to the hospital.

The first thing to remember is that bad days are inescapable. The human capacity for pain and suffering, and mistakes, goes all the way back to our creation. To love is to be open to hurt. To care is to be open to disappointment. Yet to love and to care is to live. It is to experience the

world by being affected, changed, transformed, and turned around by people who love and care for us in return. A person's capacity for joy is only as great as their capacity for suffering.

Our Christian faith affirms that to truly live and love is to be open, accessible, and vulnerable, and that leaves us open to bad days and resentment as well as good ones. The Christian faith then goes on to emphasize the importance of living through the bad days, not giving in or giving up on them. And more than that, the Christian faith affirms that God lives right alongside us during the bad days as well as the good ones.

But there are some bad days we can make better or even avoid altogether. This is especially true of those bad days and times that are caused by resentment. Let's examine this issue more closely.

First, what is resentment, and what are some of its causes? One person describes resentment this way: "Resentment is yesterday's irritation scratched into the sensitive membranes of our memory. It is yesterday's hurt grown up into today's indignation. Planted and tended in our memory, the thorn that first pricked us now stabs away at our peace. Memories of minor hurts become major resentments."

One major cause of resentment is the incessant temptation to always be comparing ourselves to others. We think, "How come she gets all the breaks and I get none?" We can even come to resent God's love and forgiveness toward others. We wonder, "Why does God seem to love him more than me?" We resent the idea when we are told that God loves the very people we think are not worthy of God's love — people we dislike or even hate.

When Jesus returned to his hometown synagogue and preached a sermon on the text from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord," the hometown folks were at first impressed. But as he began to spell out the implications of Isaiah's words, they became angry and resentful.

Their resentment was caused by an issue far more serious than the fact that here was a familiar hometown individual preaching to them. They had heard that he had been carrying on a ministry in Capernaum, which had a large non-Jewish population. Jesus could feel their resentment over that. And then, to make matters worse, he reminded them of some Old Testament stories that they didn't want to hear. He told them about Elijah and Elisha, two of the greatest Old Testament prophets who took God's favor to non-Jews, and God blessed them in their ministry.

These two stories were in their own scriptures and well-known to them. Anger and resentment are the last defense of those who are made to face the truth of their own tradition, which they have long defended and embraced. Learning what we already know is often painfully difficult. All of us know what it is to be at war with ourselves, sometimes making casualties of those who are guilty of nothing but speaking the truth in love.

So it is that a major cause of resentment is the fact that we are offended by God's grace to those of whom we do not approve. That's what the book of Jonah in the Old Testament is all about. The reason I did not want to preach to the Ninevites, said Jonah to God, was "I knew you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." (Jonah

4:2) Jonah resented God's love, grace, and forgiveness toward people he did not think worthy of them.

One of the mysteries about resentment is — why do we hang on to it? What kind of pleasure can we get from it? What kind of reward is there for us?

We think we get rewards from hanging on because resentment makes us feel superior to the person we resent. Also, it gives us an excuse for indulging in exquisite plots for revenge. We savor the possibility of getting even.

At the same time, we also hate the resentment in us because we are miserable in it. It takes a lot of energy. It depresses us, robs us of gratitude, and spills over into other relationships. Resentment blocks love. That's the worst part of all. Love and resentment are always in conflict.

That's why the Apostle wrote, "Love is not irritable or resentful." It blocks love because it views the person toward whom we are resentful through a lens clouded with anger. The people who were resentful toward Jesus that day in his hometown synagogue were also angry with him and therefore could not see him clearly for what he was.

What, then, are some positive ways for overcoming our resentment? Ideally, of course, the way to handle resentment is to prevent it from taking place. But that's easier said than done. However, one way to nip it in the bud is to remember there is no scarcity in love. Because God loves people we ourselves have difficulty in loving or do not think deserve God's love does not mean that God loves us any less. Furthermore, it does not mean that God has taken away some love from us to give it to someone else. God's love has no limits. There is an unending supply.

The same can be true of our love for one another. Let me be personal for a moment. As some of you know, I grew up in a family of seven children. One of the things each one of us had to learn was that our parents had more than enough love for all of us. Because my mother one day showed special attention and love to one of my siblings did not mean that she was taking some love away from me to give it to someone else.

Genuine love flows from abundance, not from scarcity. The more one loves, the more love one has to give.

In addition, remember you gain nothing from resentment. There is no payoff for you, only loss. What did Jonah gain from being resentful about the fact that God loved the people in Nineveh as much as the people of his own kind? What did the people in Jesus' hometown gain from being resentful over the fact that he had carried God's love to the people of Capernaum?

Second, since resentment cannot always be prevented or avoided, try to deal with it openly and directly. Jesus said, "If you are bringing your gift to the altar and have something against another human being, leave your offering there before the altar and go be reconciled with that person first." The more and the longer one suppresses anger and hurt, the more it turns sour, and the more damage it does.

Third, remember what the Apostle Paul had to say in the passage on love from 1 Corinthians. "Love can drive out the demon of remembered hurt and pain." The power of God's love working in us can bring us to a new beginning. Love lets the past die. It moves us to a new

beginning without worrying about settling the past. It forgives the past. In other words, love does not clear up all misunderstanding. In the spirit of love, the details of the past become irrelevant; only its new beginning matters. Accounts may go unsettled; differences remain unresolved; ledgers stay unbalanced. Love does not have to get even. That's the big difference.

Conflicts between people's memories of how things happened are not cleared up — they are left in the past. They become unimportant. We let go. Only the present and the future matter. Love's power relieves us from being fussy historians. Genuine love prefers to forget all about the loose ends of right and wrong in the past. Forgiveness takes over and pushes us to a new start. Letting go of the past and beginning here and now to move again toward a reconciled life is one of the hardest things any human being is ever asked to do. But love has the power to do just that.

God's love is our model. It keeps flowing to us, though we have offended over and over again. It is God's love that also makes it possible for us to love unconditionally. We are enabled by a love that keeps no score. The score-keeping we like to do in human relationships can be our stumbling block. God is not interested in our losses and wins with other people.

God's love is not resentful — ever. So we no longer have any need to savor those past hurts, to collect them and guard them. Let them go. We have no need to nourish resentment. It only causes more trouble. We can forgive and start fresh. Amen.