

LOVE AS VEGETABLE
Sermon for Epiphany 4C—1Cor13:1-13
LPC, 2/3/13

Once upon a time there was a community of simple folks who lived off the land. They did very well during the warm weather, but they lacked the ability to store food over the winter. The cold weather was very hard on them, and inevitably people starved.

Finally they went to their holy man and begged him to intercede with their god to save them from their harsh winters. The holy man duly ascended their Sacred Mountain, where he stayed for several days.

Upon his return, the community clustered about him excitedly. Had their god spoken? "Not only spoken," proclaimed the holy man, "but bestowed a holy gift that will save us from starving in the winter!" The people could barely contain their excitement and clamored to see the gift.

Reverently the holy man reached into his tunic, where he had carried the gift next to his heart. He unwrapped the cloths, torn from his own clothes, that he had used to protect the gift in transit. Then he held out the gift for all to see.

The heavenly Object was not very prepossessing. It was small enough to be held in the holy man's hands. It was golden-brown in color, and a somewhat lumpy ovoid shape. It resembled nothing so much to the sight as an ordinary rock, though it was clearly not as dense or as hard.

However, it was a gift from their god, so the people fell down and venerated it. They built a special shrine, with a special altar, and developed a regular schedule and liturgy to worship at it.

For the first time that anyone could remember, people looked forward to winter. They couldn't wait to see how the heavenly Object would save them from their usual travails.

Winter came at last. When the food stores became depleted, the people waited anxiously for the holy Object to perform. They waited and waited. People began to starve, same as always. By the end of the winter, they were fewer in number, discouraged and perplexed. But they still could not believe that their god would disregard their prayers. They still believed the holy Object could save them.

"Perhaps it takes a full year for our god's magic to take effect," they said. "Or perhaps we haven't worshipped it well enough." They redoubled their liturgical efforts.

That spring was particularly wet, and people began to notice a bad smell in the Shrine of the Holy Object. Could the Object actually be rotting? No one had conceived that the Object might have been a living thing, subject to the same corruption as animals and plants and humans. "We must save our Object!" the people cried. They took the Object, and using their secret arts, they embalmed it.

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According to custom, after the embalming process was finished, they painted the object and sealed it in a casket of precious metals. Thus, the object remained incorruptible.

But by the end of the next winter it was also clear that it also remained ineffective at protecting the community from starvation, so the people sent their holy man up the Sacred Mountain again for further word from their god.

When the holy man returned, most of the crowd was too excited to notice that he seemed more ashamed than elevated by his mountaintop experience. . "Did our god speak?" cried the people. "Yes," said the holy man. "So, tell us!" shouted the people.

The holy man slowly lifted heavy eyes and cleared his throat. He said, "Thus spake the Lord:

'You idiots! I gave you something that could have spared you suffering, but you have placed it in a shrine where it can do no good! You should have cut the Object into pieces and buried them in the ground in the spring. By summer, green plants would have grown from them. By fall, you could have dug up the roots, which would have swollen to edible size and been many in number. If properly stored, these roots would have kept through the winter. They are good to eat and could keep you from starving!'

"Wow!" said the people, "Who knew? What kind of wondrous Object is this, anyway?"

"Our god told me that too," said the holy man, "Thus saith the Lord: 'Behold the Potato!'"

This parable is told as an example of what people sometimes do with the gifts God gives us that can actually save us, if we have the wit to use them properly.

One such gift is this beautiful and well-known essay about love, from the 13th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. This passage is embroidered on samplers, pressed into bookmarks, and solemnly intoned at weddings. But this passage is not intended as an object of veneration. It is intended as a gift that can literally save us.

This is not an ode to love. It is an exhortation to love. And it is a description of what love looks like. This is particularly helpful to us today when the word "love" has been debased to mean a strong preference, as in, "Oh I just love that show!" or romantic love exclusively, as in valentines or chick flicks.

You want to know how to love your neighbor? How to love your enemies? Loving your neighbors and enemies has little to do with how you feel about them and everything to do with how you treat them. Here it is, how to love your neighbor: Be patient with them. Be kind to them. Do not envy or boast or be arrogant or rude, or insist on your own way. Be truthful, bear their burdens, be faithful, keep hoping, and bear up.

Love is not so much a many-splendored thing. Love is more like a small, earthy, wholesome, potato-like thing. If properly handled, it keeps for ever. And if we actually put it to work as intended, it will literally save us.