

The Rev. Jimmy Abbott
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 29, 2012
I Corinthians 8:1-13

Alban Lovedwell

My credentials as an armchair historian are above reproach. I have a degree in history from the University of Texas; I wrote a master's thesis in church history; and poor Maggie, my wife, is subjected to off-the-cuff history lectures over dinner. Now, and I hope you will agree, I have spared you all from my historical musings while in this pulpit. And I have spared you long enough.

In the 1590s, the English economy suffered a devastating downturn. Urban, middle-class laborers couldn't find stable employment. Inflation caused the price of manufactured goods to skyrocket. Four straight years of crop failures led to increased food prices across England. During the devastation of the 1590s recession, families often found it difficult to feed their children. We hear echoes of 1590s England in today's world.

English cities and the English countryside are dotted with Anglican churches, which we, as Episcopalians, come from. During that recession, when the birth of a child meant another costly mouth to feed, there arose a grave practice. Families who couldn't afford more food for their newborn child would often leave that child on the church grounds. The family would hope, and would pray that the church would step in and carry the burden of these children.

When an abandoned child was found on the church grounds, the priest and the congregation would, as a sign of God's love, baptize the abandoned child. And of course, as we will hear shortly in this service, all people must be baptized with a name. So these sad, abandoned infants needed names. As historians look through old church records, they find the

advent of a curious tradition. The priest would name them after a local church or with a description of how they were found. For instance, “Joan Foundbasket” was found at the local church in a basket. “Porch Wall” was found on the porch at St. Andrew’s-by-the-Wall. The records are full of such names; sad reminders of a sad time.

Yet despite this sadness, we witness an unconquerable love. The local church refused to leave these orphans comfortless. The church baptized them and shared the burden of the child’s needs. The local church didn’t ask questions. They didn’t need to *know* who the parents were or if the child already had a name. With the power of Jesus Christ, the church simply loved them.

This morning, seven magnificent children have been brought to this church. I am sure many of you do not know Kate, Aidon, Audrey, Halle, Parker, Ellie, or Sophie. But the church does not ask that you know these wonderful children. No, the church only demands that you love them – to build them up into the full stature of Christ. St. Paul hit the nail on the head. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Knowledge is self-centered, by definition it’s about things that *we* know. Love, on the other hand, is, by definition, not about ourselves. This is the love that we see and know from Jesus. Our Lord didn’t walk around making everybody feel warm and fuzzy inside. Jesus embodies a love that demands us to live for others. Jesus embodies a love that demands us to care for everybody, even those we don’t know. Jesus embodies a love that leads to the greatest sacrifice of all – death on a cross.

Knowledge makes no demands on our lives. But the love of God is different. This kind of love makes us ask: what can I do for the church, not what can the church do for me. And there is much you can do. There are ways that you can love these seven wonderful children who are being presented for baptism. You see, you are not an audience. You are the church. And the

church takes on the responsibility, and yes the burden, of raising these children into the full stature of Christ. It is not just me and Jeff, guys with black shirts and collars who do the praying and teaching around here. It is you. You are the ones promising to pray for these children, to care for these children, to share the burden of raising them to be fully formed Christians. You are the ones promising to teach them Sunday School. You are pledging to pray *with* and *for* them. You are promising to become their mentors, their spiritual coaches. You are making a vow to pick up the cross, and to love these children as Jesus loves us.

In a few moments, Jeff will ask you, *all of you*, if you will do all in your power to support these children in their life in Christ. Before you answer “We will,” I challenge each of you to think of real and concrete ways that you will fulfill this vow before God.

And with this, I propose that we have new names for these children. In the fashion of 1590s England, I propose this name: “Alban Lovedwell.” For it is here, in this church, St. Alban’s, that these children will be adopted into God’s household. And “Lovedwell,” for that is how they should be found. Loved in unique and sacrificial ways by each one of us. Even if you don’t know all of their lovely names, remember this one: “Alban Lovedwell,” for that is who they are becoming as they grow into the full stature of Christ.