

Sermon: "Love is ...?"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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NO SUGAR

A pastor told of something that happened when he was a boy. It seems that his mother was making some chocolate nut fudge. The smell of that delicious dish brought him into the kitchen, and he did what all of us did as children. He asked for a taste.

His mother told him that he could have some of the fudge when it was ready, but that was not the answer he wanted to hear. He pouted and insisted that his mother give him a taste. Finally, because he was making such an issue of the matter, mom relented and gave him a taste.

But, it was not the taste he expected. It was extremely bitter, and as he puckered up his face, his mother was laughing so hard that she was in tears. You guessed it. Sugar hadn't been added to the mix quite yet. Without sugar, no chocolate sauce is worth tasting.

It seems that I vaguely remember something very similar happening to me when I was a child. I guess there are some lessons that all of us have to learn for ourselves. One of those lessons is that chocolate sauce without sugar is no good at all.

And another lesson is that life without love is equally bitter.

Today we consider one of the more famous passages of the New Testament, the 13th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the so called "love" chapter. Usually, when I'm reading this passage, I'm officiating at a wedding where a passage about love seems appropriate.

But, when Paul wrote this passage, he certainly wasn't thinking about romantic love. Paul was thinking about a love so special that we even have a special Greek word in the Bible to express it, agape. This love is God's love, a love that serves to bind the Christian community together.

The Christians in Corinth were very excited about the faith. The church was filled with people who had exciting and important gifts. There were people who could heal, there were people who could teach, and there were many who could preach with power and appeal. The church at Corinth was an exciting place to be. They worshipped with great enthusiasm and emotion.

But, there was one area in which they were sorely lacking. The church failed the taste test. The church didn't have enough sugar in it. The church didn't have enough love.

Love, the kind of unconditional, no strings attached love that God has for us is the yardstick that we are to use in measuring our faithfulness as a church. Paul tells us that we may have dynamic preaching, beautiful music, sound doctrine and the best Christian education program in town. But, if we don't have love, we have nothing.

More than that, he says that without love, we are nothing. Love, love as God reveals it in Jesus Christ, is just that important.

NOT A LOVING PEOPLE

When I preach from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, I usually talk a lot about how the church at Corinth was unfaithful about their moral corruption, their factions, their elitism and doctrinal confusion. Indeed, I've often said that if the church at Corinth wanted to call me as their pastor, it would be a very easy thing to say "no."

What would be the point of going to a place with such trouble and conflict? Life's too short for all that feuding and fussing. Better to go where the people get along and agree with one another on the important issues of life.

But, when you think about it, exactly where would that be? Every church I've served or known about has ... in one way or another mirrored the church at Corinth. Diversity has led to division. Success has led to pride. Every bad thing that we see on the evening news has happened in some church at one time or another.

Now, on the one hand, our critics are right when they say that this should not be the case. After all, aren't they supposed to "know that we are Christians by our love" as the old camp song used to put it? When we act in an unloving way, we deny our Christian faith in a way that is difficult to overcome.

But, on the other hand, I also think that, though we should seriously consider and repent of our sinful lack of love, we should also be realistic about the church and the world in which we live. If we are counting on our loving actions to show others our Christian faith, I'm afraid that we will always be sending mixed messages at best.

We are, all of us, weak and vulnerable. We are not the people we should be. We are not the people we are called to be.

LOVE IS A COMMITMENT

So how do we face the reality of our often loveless ways? Do we give up on ourselves and the possibility of ever showing Christian love? I think not. According to Paul, the possibility of love is as close as our next encounter with another human being.

Love is not a feeling that comes and goes. Love is an action. Love is something that we do. Love is a commitment to do the right thing for our brother and sister despite the pain of past failure and despite our fears about the future.

There's a touching scene in the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*. Reb Tevia asks his wife of many years, "Do you love me?" And she screeches back, "Do I what?" (Some of you may remember that Jim and Jeannie Oglesby performed that scene in one of our church concerts a few years back.)

Anyway, I think that scene gives us a good example of what love is all about. Through the interplay of a delightful duet, we learn that this couple did not get together on their own. It was an arranged marriage. Their "mother and their father said they'd learn to love each other."

But, now, after all these years, he wants to know, "Do you love me?"

She has to think about that one. The wife recounts all the things she has done to maintain the family ... cooking the meals, cleaning the clothes, having babies and so forth. Finally, she concludes her solo with the words, "If that's not love, what is?" In other words, though they may not have been the most romantic couple in the world, she has shown her love to her husband by her actions.

Reb Tevia understands, and the scene closes as he and his wife then bask in the love that has come from many years of commitment and sacrifice. Usually that scene draws an “ahhh” from the audience, especially from those of us who have been at this love thing for a while.

Whenever I counsel people who are considering marriage, it is this commitment aspect of love that I always emphasize. I say that it is not who you are today that matters most. It is who you will become together. Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches ethics at Duke University wrote that the most basic law of marriage could be stated in this sentence: “You always marry the wrong person.”

“The one thought to be Mr. or Ms. Right turns out not to be But, the adventure of marriage is learning to love the person to whom you are married ... Love does not create a marriage; marriage teaches us what a costly adventure love is.”

I believe the decision to follow Jesus and become a part of His Body, the church is a commitment similar to marriage. At first we may join because we have certain needs that a particular church seems to fill.

But, as we mature in the faith, we begin to understand that the church is not the place where everything goes well and people automatically love each other. The church is not the place that meets our needs all the time in every way. The church is that place where we learn to take that risky journey called love. The church is the place that teaches us what a costly adventure love can be. The church is the place where we learn to love each other with no strings attached.

And it's through that kind of risky loving of imperfect brothers and sisters, that we begin to understand, really understand what it means to be loved by God. There is simply no other way to learn about love. It is a rose that must be smelled. Only the experience of love can change us.

AN OVERCOMING LOVE

So, that means we must develop a love that is not easily discouraged by the often thoughtless ways we treat each other. As Paul put it,
Love teaches us to be patient.
Love teaches us to be kind.
Love teaches us not to keep a record of who has wronged us.

We must learn a love that expects imperfection and yet seeks to overcome it with grace. Now don't misunderstand. This way of love is not natural or easy. Quite frankly our natural inclination when wronged is to do exactly what Paul tells us not to do. Our natural inclination is to become impatient with those who mistreat us. Our natural inclination is to keep a record of wrongs and repay rude ways with anger.

Sometimes too many times I have succumbed to my natural inclinations. And the result has been to perpetuate a cycle of negative events. But, on occasion, I have not done what comes naturally. I have tried to be patient and kind and forgiving. Those actions were not easy nor did they make me “feel good” at least at that moment. But, looking back on my life, I can truthfully say that I have never regretted those actions. The same cannot be said of those times when I gave free reign to my anger.

Sometimes people talk about just needing to “vent” that is, giving free reign to their anger. I don't believe in venting. I don't believe in unloading on someone. I don't believe in constantly dragging up past hurts and mulling over them. I believe that it does not promote healing, and it can perpetuate conflict.

When I was studying psychology in college, I read a study once that suggested a certain kind of therapy which involved a detailed analysis of the past actually made people get worse instead of better. I'm not surprised. Keeping a record of wrongs is not good for our mental health nor is it the loving thing to do.

But, be forewarned. This kind of loving is not easy. It requires sacrifice and great will power. And, when we look back, we will see that it requires more than anything else, the Spirit of Christ working in and through us.

LOVE NEVER FAILS?

The apostle Paul makes a statement in our lesson for today that some of us might disagree with strongly. Paul said, "Love never fails or ends." (1 Corinthians 13:8)

When it comes to human love, of course, that is a patent falsehood. Love fails every day. Love fails with husbands and wives. Love fails with parents and children. Love fails with friends and neighbors. Many of the people you meet each day have significant psychological problems because love has failed. And it's not because they haven't tried either. They have tried. But, things haven't worked out.

But, the Christian believes that there is a love beyond our loves. The Christian believes that there is reality beyond the reality we know. The Christian believes that our failure to love will not have the last word. There is an "X" factor operating in the world of faith which the world of despair has not accounted for.

That's what Paul was talking about when he wrote,

[9] For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; [10] but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. [11] 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. 1 Corinthians 13:9-11 (NRSV)

What are the childish ways that Paul has decided to put away? It is the idea that he can know and understand love on his own. On our own we can't know what love means. On our own we see only partial glimpses of what might be or could be. Our grandest hopes fail, and our fondest desires disappoint.

The reason we find love so difficult is that we do not appreciate our own weakness. There is so much we cannot see and understand. We are looking through a distorted lens, a foggy mirror when it comes to our life and this world. (1 Corinthians 13:12)

But, God in Christ helps us see things more clearly.

As many of you know, I've gotten glasses in the past year. Like most people who get glasses, I've been reluctant to wear them as much as I probably should vanity and all that. But, when I do wear my glasses, I can see things so much more clearly. It's a whole new world.

John Calvin once wrote that the same is true when we look at the world through the lens of God's Word, the Bible. The Bible is like a pair of glasses which enable us to see the world as it really is. And in particular, the life, death and resurrection of Christ as revealed in Scripture shows us most clearly the truth about love.

LOVE ON THE CROSS

Love is, at it's heart, in the shape of a cross.

Paul wrote at the very beginning of his letter to the Corinthians that this was the center of what he believed and trusted. He wrote, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." The cross has always been a stumbling block for Christians and non-Christians alike. God loved us so much that He sent His Son into the world, and what did the world do? The world killed him. It would seem that when we killed Jesus, we killed off our last best chance at love.

But, the Bible teaches us that love did not die on the cross. The forces of self-betrayal .. they die. The self-justifying lies ... they fail. Indeed, the Bible teaches us that the final enemy, death itself, is crucified on that cross. On the cross we do not see the collapse and failure of love, but love's faithfulness. On the cross we see love's victory despite the worst we can do to one another.

Paul points to the one place in our history where love might finally be called a failure, and it is at this place where love steadfastly hangs on. In the cross, the empty cross, Paul sees the guarantee that the one thing which still stands when all else is fallen is love the love and triumph of God in Jesus Christ.

That love changed the world, and it created a community of people who were sustained by that hope. Read the testimony of the New Testament. Every phrase and every line is written because of love triumphing when all else had failed.

And it is that same love which calls out to us this very day. It is that same love which calls us away from a world which elevates rudeness to an art form and killing to a science. It is that same love which calls us away from a life of unfulfilling self-absorption to a life of selfless, yet fulfilling service. It is that same love which calls us to give up everything so that we might gain our soul.

Once again we celebrate communion, the Lord's Supper.

Do you want to see love clearly? Consider the words and actions of our Lord Jesus. He told his disciples,

[13] No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.
John 15:13 (NRSV)

And then, on the "same night in which he was betrayed," he took bread and blessed and broke it and said, "This is my body which is broken for you."
Then he took the cup and said, "This is my blood shed for you."

He died that we might live. In him we learn about God's forgiveness, and we have the hope of life eternal.

Paul was right. Sometimes that hope seems dim. There is much that we don't understand on this side of eternity. But, one thing is sure. If we put that hope into action, if we love as he loved and forgive as he forgave, we will begin to have faith in that eternal hope.

Love will abide with us both now and forever.

Amen.