

Sermon Series: A Summons to Faith, Hope, and Love

III. “Love: The Greatest Gift”

Text: I Corinthians 13:1-13

The Reverend Joanna M. Adams

Morningside Presbyterian Church

Atlanta, GA

May 4, 2008

...and the greatest of these is love.

When I deliver a short sermon or homily at a wedding, I sometimes quote one of my favorite passages from the writings of the poet Rilke: “for one human being to love another, that is perhaps the most difficult task that has been entrusted to us, the ultimate task, the final test and proof, the work for which all other work is mere preparation.”

The poet emphasizes the challenges of love, all of which are quite real. Today’s passage from Paul speaks of the beautiful creation that emerges when people choose to be governed by love rather than by the bitterness, the envy, the rivalry and resentment that can arise when love is absent. People are often surprised to learn that Paul wrote this eloquent treatise on love to a congregation of early Christians who were involved in what is surely the ugliest invention of organized religion. I am speaking, of course, of a church fight. The Corinthian church was in the middle of a mess. Sides had been drawn. The issues over which people disagreed were numerous. One of the most divisive issues, interestingly enough, was the matter of spiritual gifts. For example, were those who had been given the gift of eloquence of speech to be thought of more highly than those who were able to speak in unintelligible tongues? Some looked on others with disdain and upon themselves through the rose-colored glasses of self adoration. If you read between the lines, you see that even those who gave generously to the poor, or who were willing to die for the cause of Christ, tended toward haughtiness about their humbleness.

Paul could have washed his hands of this crowd, but he didn’t. Banking on his deep conviction that only love can rebuild a community, he dives right into the heart of the Christian gospel and comes back with a plan. The plan is a plan for ethical behavior. If this plan is followed, the character of the congregation can be built up, along with the character of every member of the church.

Don’t be misled by the fact that neither the name of God nor the name of Jesus appears in the 13th Chapter of I Corinthians. Paul’s understanding of love is fundamentally formed by the love of God known in Jesus Christ. *Agape* love it is

called in Greek. God's love, originating in the heart of God. This is love that goes all the way and does not count the cost. This is love that is not puffed up, but is willing to lay down its life for the sake of others. This is the kind of love that gives itself away. This is *agape* love, the way that God loves, as revealed in the gift of God's own son. It is no wonder that of the Bible verses we remember, most of us remember *for God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten son ..*

I spoke to a man this week who was ordained in this sanctuary 50 years ago. I asked him why he had gone into the ministry. He said, "When I was a kid, and went to church, I heard two things: God is love, and Jesus was out doing good. I've tried to build my life on those two realities."

William Sloane Coffin says, of God's love we can say two things: "It is poured out universally for everyone everywhere, from the Pope to the loneliest wino on the planet. And secondly, God's love does not seek value. It is not because we have value that we are loved by God; rather, it is because we are loved by God that we have value." (1)

I would add one more to Coffin's list, and I think Paul would have added it as well: By the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I are given the capacity to love as God loved. Love is the primary attribute the church should show forth to the world.

What happens when love becomes left out of the equation? I found this little note written on a piece of paper in an old file of mine this week. It gave me chills when I read it. "The world is often kept from discovering the love of God by the brokenness of the church." The quote may be old, but the reality is as fresh as the latest church assembly or the congregational argument over the color of the carpet. One of the reasons I love this church is that we didn't go to war when we put new carpet in the sanctuary. Thanks be to God!

A congregation can have the greatest music since Mozart, the smartest people since Augustine and Erasmus, but if there is no love, it gains no one anything. "If we fail in love, we fail in all other things." (2) This is true, true for the church, true for human beings, true for institutions, true for human societies.

I am speaking of love today, not so much as a feeling, but as a way of behaving, regardless of how you feel. You might feel irritable, but you don't have to act irritable. I am thinking of love as an act of will, rather than as an emotion. As we know from experience, emotions can be fickle things, here today, gone the next, unreliable compasses by which to live or build a relationship on finally.

I like this definition of love: it is "that life-enhancing activity that flows from God to human beings," flows from human beings to other human beings, and then back to God and all around.

I like Paul's list of what love does. It believes; it bears up; it hopes; it endures; it lasts. It enables us to last through things we would not have imagined we could have handled.

I also like Paul's list of what love does not do: It does not insist on its own way; it's not irritable or arrogant or rude. It does not keep a list of wrongs. You know, sometimes when I am in traffic sitting there waiting, I can just start on my list of wrongs. Can you? You think about a person and then you think about all the things that person didn't do that you wish they had. You can just work yourself up into a lather before the light turns green. I wish I could spiritualize some of this for you and me, but I can't. Paul was talking about real, genuine behavior. He wanted people to change the way they were behaving. He believed it was possible, even for the seriously irritable, resentful, and rude Corinthians. He wanted them to open themselves and receive afresh the spiritual gift that governs the exercise of every other spiritual gift.

Notice that the Corinthians – we think of the Corinthians as people who live in a book of the Bible, but they were actually citizens of the nation of Greece. There could have been nothing more alien to the Greeks than the concept of Christian love, as Paul interpreted it. "They invented self-government; they invented a civic community made up of free individuals; they invented the writing of history, philosophy, tragedy, comedy." (3) Jesus was not a Greek. Jesus was a Jew from Nazareth, and he introduced a radically new concept into western civilization. No one had ever heard before, "Love your enemies"! No one had ever heard anyone say, "Bless those who curse you"! "I give you a new commandment that you love one another. . . by this the world will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." He washed the feet of the one who would betray him. His love went all the way. This new approach to life is what God has given the world through Christ, and what God continues to give to the world today.

We say that God so loved the world. We don't just stop at this idea of love at the outskirts of our family circle. Have you been reading the headlines about record food prices all over the world, the international crisis over rice, what the United Nations is now calling a "silent tsunami" of hunger? If love is indeed the most powerful force on earth, then something can be done about this. What is lacking is action, the right action from America's Congress, the right action from the governments of the countries where famine is raging, right action by you and me. I understand that the Atlanta Community Food Bank is overwhelmed with more requests each week than at anytime since the Food Bank was founded. I also understand that our Mission committee at Morningside Church has offered us a way to respond to the rice crisis. Carolyn Morton has explained it twice to me now, but you go online, and you play some sort of a vocabulary game and you earn cups of rice to give to people who are hungry. Carolyn is here today; she will explain it all to you.

It seems as if we come into the world as red-faced, wrinkled little bundles of need, that we are born only to care about ourselves, but I believe God buried inside of us something else. I know that evolution teaches the survival of the fittest and the survival of the species, and that is what animals do. The worker bee will sting an intruder, committing suicide as it were, because he must guard the hive and the queen. A grown-up baboon will guard the little baboons against predators and lose his life if necessary. These kind of things can be explained by the survival of the species and the survival of one's particular family and one's particular gene pool. But I am intrigued by the question that Lewis Thomas, author and physician has asked, "When a marine throws himself belly down on a live grenade, in order to preserve the rest of the platoon, is that just an instinct to protect one's own and one's own genes? Surely the marine's genes are being blown away. The statistical likelihood of his having brothers and cousins in that same platoon is very small. And yet, there he is, belly down, his life poured out. We are born with a fondness for one another. We can be talked out of it, for the genetic message is like distant music and some of us are hard of hearing. Societies are noisy. They drown out the sounds of ourselves and our connections. Hard of hearing, we go to war. Stone deaf, we make thermo-nuclear missiles. But nevertheless, the music of fondness is there, waiting for more listeners." (4)

The Beatles were wrong when they said "Love, love, love. That's all you need." (5) It is the most important thing that we need, but we also need justice and mercy, wisdom and intelligence. Yet, without love, none of it will work right. Without love in this fractious world, we are goners. This is what the Apostle Paul wanted to say 2,000 years ago, and no one has ever said it better than he.

Let me close with this story. Elam Davies was a great preacher, one of the great preachers of the 20th century. He served Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago for many, many years. He died during the time that I was there. He was a Welchman, and in his last sermon at Fourth, told what he said was the story that summarized every sermon that he had ever tried to preach in that magnificent sanctuary. He said that he and his wife were on holiday in Wales. They had driven to the top of a Welch landmark to catch a spectacular sunset. "All of God's kaleidoscope was spread before them like a cosmic artist's canvas. They were drinking in this magnificence, when an old car pulled up alongside theirs. An elderly couple emerged. They moved to the rear door of the car, where lay their son, their son of later years, full-grown, yet physically so incapacitated he could not sit up in the seat. Somehow, the two of them contrived to get him out of the car, to slide his legs around, so that he could at least be facing toward the sunset. Just as the sun with all its magnificence was giving its final burst of glory, the father put his finger under the chin of the son and turned his head so he could stare fully into the magnificent sight that was before them."

"And I knew," Dr. Davies said, "that God can dazzle us with all the magnificence of the universe. But the secret of the universe, the heart of the universe, is

revealing its glory there in that father's finger on the tip of his son's chin. Compassion, grace, love, they come when we need them most."

That's it. That's the heart of the matter - that you and I, no matter who we are, matter to God. Because God loves us so much, we are able to love one another.

(1) *Credo*, WJK Press, 2004, p. 6.

(2) *Ibid.*

(3) Donald R. Eastman III, President, Eckerd College, October 30, 2005.

(4) *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony*, Penguin Books, 1995, p.103-105.

(5) Eastman.

(6) As told by J. Barrie Davies, in *Aspects of Love*, Upper Room Books, 1995, p. 123.