

But the greatest of these is love

When selecting a topic to use for the theme of a service I usually opt to follow the Lectionary. The Lectionary lays out the main stories and readings of the Bible so that over a three year cycle each one should be studied. After being asked to lead worship today, my interest was piqued when I referred to the list and found this passage from Corinthians listed for today. It is probably one of the more familiar Bible readings and I'm sure that you've heard it read many times, particularly at weddings. Reading it again carefully to prepare this message it occurred to me that its meaning didn't carry the weight that it should because it felt so familiar. This was going to be my chance to dig deeper into the meaning of the "love" passage. Thank you for showing confidence in me by asking that I speak at today's worship service. You have given me the opportunity to pray and think about this familiar passage and it is my prayer this morning that these words will be helpful to you in your own life.

The book of First Corinthians was written by Paul to the church in Corinth and to Christians everywhere. The Christians in Corinth were living amid corruption and every conceivable sin. They knew of the freedom available through Christ but they were still learning what this meant. Paul heard of the struggles that the people of Corinth were having and wrote this letter attempting to deal with these problems, help with the divisions in their church, and answer the questions that they needed direction on.

Paul discusses the importance of spiritual gifts in the previous chapter of his letter. I'm reading today from a version of the Bible called "The Message" and in First Corinthians 12: 25 - 31 it reads:

The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance.

You are Christ's body - that's who you are. You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of this body does your "part" mean anything. You're familiar with some of the parts that God has formed in his church, which is his body; apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, helpers, organizers and those who pray in tongues. But it's obvious by now, isn't it, that Christ's church is a complete body and not a gigantic unidimensional part. It's not all Apostle, not all Prophet, not all Miracle Worker, not all Healer, not all Prayer in Tongues, not all Interpreter of Tongues. And yet some of you keep competing for so-called important parts. But now I want to lay out a far better way for you

Paul recognized that the people in the church of Corinth were competing for the important roles as part of the body. Each thought their spiritual gift was more important than the other. Paul closes out chapter twelve telling them that he wanted to lead them into a far better way. His intention was to show them that although all the spiritual gifts they shared were important none other was more important than love.

Think of an orchestra performing an intricate piece of music. You might hear the large gong or the crash of the cymbals in only a couple of places through the arrangement. When played in the proper planned section of the symphony the effect of the cymbals is wonderful. However if the cymbal player simply threw out the music and began playing at random we'd hear only a series of crashes scattered wildly amongst the soothing music. This is similar to how the church in Corinth was functioning. Their symphony should have been an arrangement of love with the appropriate spiritual gift added at the correct time. However, what they were playing was a series of loud cymbal crashes, the collection of spiritual gifts they shared, without the love mixed in. All that could be heard was crash, crash, crash. Their lives were playing out with all noise and very little love.

Paul goes on with his discussion on spiritual gifts in chapter 13 to talk of the fact that love is the greatest gift. This passage can be divided into three sections: the first verses talk of the importance of love followed by the definition of love and ending with the last verses telling of the permanency of love. The importance of love is described well in the first verses taken from The Message:

If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't have love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain "Jump" and it jumps, but I don't have love, I'm nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love

Many of the popular songs heard on the radio, especially country and western lyrics, make love sound like a feeling that just happens – or stops happening – that is not necessarily controlled. However, love is not something that you simply fall in and out of. Remember back to weddings where you've heard a speaker read this traditional passage about love. After the reading they usually go on to remind us that love is a commitment. It requires work. Love takes deliberate actions and decisions. When the Bible refers to love, it's almost always written as a command. We're commanded to love our neighbours, husbands and wives are commanded to love each other. Jesus teaches that love should be part of everything we do.

I read the words "if I give everything I own to the poor." What motivates people to give. Is it that we're seeking a better place in heaven? Are we looking for an income tax deduction? Do we need to impress a friend with how much we support the needy? Do we give because we do it out of guilt when we see others around us freely giving?

Paul makes it very clear. Unless we give out of love we are bankrupt. Verse 3:

Even if I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Paul continues this passage giving a more in depth definition of love. He describes the many ways we can think of love. Perhaps the list can be broken into two sections. One being what love is: love is patient, kind, rejoices in the truth, never gives up, never loses faith, and is always hopeful. The other being what love is not: love is not jealous, proud, irritable, boastful, rude or self seeking. Rather than simply listening to these words as we do at a wedding ceremony, let's give some of these some more thought.

Love is patient. We read that Abraham Lincoln had a most outspoken political enemy in Edwin Stanton. Stanton was known to call Lincoln "a low cunning clown" and the "original gorilla." He went so far as to say "It is ridiculous for people to go to Africa to see a gorilla, when they can find one easily in Springfield, Illinois." Through all these insults Lincoln never responded. When Lincoln was elected president he appointed Stanton as secretary of war. "Why," people asked "would you choose him?" Lincoln's answer was that he was the best man for the job. After the assassination of Lincoln, Stanton described him as the greatest ruler of men the world had ever seen. The result of Lincoln's patient love had won over Stanton.

Love is kind. Kindness leads us to reach out to others with respect and genuine caring. Love is not something that can be shared through a feeling of hatred or meanness. An important way for love to flourish is through kindness toward others.

True love is not jealous of the possessions that others have nor should we be envious of the abilities of others. Rather than being jealous when those around us do well and prosper, we are expected to be pleased for others when they do well.

Loves is not self seeking. A person acting through love does not try to draw attention to what they're doing. The person who needs to be the centre of attention, and feels hurt if they're not, isn't showing love. Real love cares about what will help others and never looks at how to prosper itself first. A loving person doesn't brag. They understand that all they are and have has come from God. It doesn't matter what spectacular gifts we have or how great are our talents, all has been given by the grace of God. On this point we can look to the teaching of Jesus, reading now from Matthew 6:1-2, in the New King James Version:

Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before others, to be seen by them... When you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you...

Love is not rude. Love always treats others with respect, compassion and consideration. It isn't something that can be friendly at one time and rude the next. Genuine love is constant.

Forgiveness is an important part of love. A true loving person doesn't hold on to memories of wrong done against them but rather forgives the actions and responds with love. There is no need to dwell on the actions of others. We should be focusing on love being the driving force for our actions.

In the book "Loving God", Charles Colson tells of a quiet act of forgiveness that began a chain of events that still survives. Deep in one of Siberia's prison camps a Jew by the name of Dr. Boris Kornfeld was imprisoned. As a medical doctor he worked in surgery and otherwise helped both the staff and the prisoners. He met a Christian, whose name is unknown, whose quiet faith and his frequent reciting of the Lord's Prayer moved Dr. Kornfeld. One day, while repairing a guard's artery which had been cut in a knifing, he seriously considered suturing it in such a way that he would bleed to death a little while later. Then, appalled by the hatred and violence he saw in his own heart, he found himself repeating the words of the nameless prisoner: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Shortly after that prayer Dr. Kornfeld began to refuse to go along with some of the standard practices of the prison camp, including one day turning in an orderly who had stolen food from a dying patient. After that he knew his life was in danger, so he began to spend as much time as possible in the relative safety of the hospital. One afternoon he examined a patient who had just been operated on for cancer of the intestines, a man whose eyes and face reflected a depth of spiritual misery and emptiness that moved Kornfeld. So the doctor began to talk to the patient, telling him the entire story, an incredible confession of secret faith. That night someone snuck in and smashed Dr. Kornfeld's head while he was asleep-he died a few hours later. But Kornfeld's testimony did not die. For the patient who had heard his confession, became, as a result, a Christian. And he survived that prison camp and went on to tell the world what he had learned there. The patient was the great writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.¹

Paul concludes the passage describing the permanency of love. "Love never fails." He uses an example to show the temporary nature of our spiritual gifts. Verse 11 reads:

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me

We're granted spiritual gifts to use in our Christian lives on earth. We use those gifts in our service to others. In eternity, we will be in the very presence of God. Spiritual gifts won't be needed as we'll be made complete. Verse 12 offers a glimpse into what we might expect:

Now, we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we will see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹ James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988) p. 190.

Mirrors in Paul's day weren't the perfect pieces of glass we have today. They were polished pieces of brass so even in the best mirror the image was dull compared to what we're used to. Paul is telling us that one day we will see clearly and have the answers to all the questions that seem impossible to answer now.

Through this passage Paul is teaching that we're not judged by our gifts but through our love. There may be those that feel by sharing their spiritual gifts with others will give them a good report on their spiritual report card. However, Paul suggests that even though our gifts may be through the roof that doesn't mean all is well. His words call us to look at our love, rather than dwelling on our gifts. Actions in love are the real measure of one's life.

As I mentioned earlier, in beginning to work with this topic I wondered if perhaps love was something I took for granted. Most mornings, as Debbie and I go off to work, I'll give her a kiss and say "Love you." Any time a phone conversation with my children ends I always say "I love you." This last couple of weeks has caused me to reflect on these three words. I've been more conscious of what these words mean. These aren't just words that should simply be said. These are words that should be offered with feeling, with an understanding that they carry with them a sense of who and what we are. These are words that shouldn't be offered in a superficial manner but in a way that carries with them a genuine feeling.

Richard Foster, a fine Christian writer, puts it this way;

Today the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to him. He grieves that we have forgotten him. He weeps over our obsession with muchness and manyness. He longs for our presence... And he is inviting you and me to come home, to come home to where we belong... His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in, for too long we have been in a far country; a country of noise and hurry and crowds, a country of climb and push and shove, a country of frustration, fear and intimidation. And He welcome us home ..." We need to come home.²

God doesn't offer to change those around us. Instead, faith in God changes us. Paul's writings challenged the Christians in Corinth and today challenge us to become loving persons. When we accept this guidance we'll find God waiting for us, ready to receive us, with open arms.

Perhaps I can close by leaving you with food for thought. Can you face each day without being resentful or irritable? Reflect on how often you insist on having your own way and try to be considerate of those around you. Is there envy in your thoughts and can you change those thoughts to ones of love? Remember to be kind and patient and to love your husband, wife, neighbour, fellow members of this congregation, and others in the world who are in desperate need of the love of others. There's a good reason for some Bible passages to be familiar and when they are, that's the very reason we should read that passage again and think and pray about what it means to our lives as Christians.

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

Amen.

² Foster, Richard. "Paryer - Finding the Heart's True Home" www.praybold.org