



## THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

FEBRUARY 3, 2019

1 CORINTHIANS 13: 1-13

“THIS THING CALLED LOVE”

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 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 the ways of childhood behind me. For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

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

ST. PAUL'S ODE TO LOVE IS LIKELY THE NUMBER ONE PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE READ AT WEDDINGS. AND, AT FIRST GLANCE, IT SEEMS TO MAKE PERFECT SENSE. AFTER ALL, WHAT COUPLE WOULDN'T WANT TO EXPERIENCE A MARRIAGE WHERE LOVE IS PATIENT AND KIND? WHERE LOVE IS NOT SELF-SEEKING, WHERE LOVE KEEPS NO RECORD OF WRONGS?

BUT PAUL IS NOT SPEAKING TO COUPLES EXCHANGING VOWS BEFORE AN ALTAR. PAUL IS SPEAKING TO THE CONGREGATION AT CORINTH. **THIS ODE TO LOVE IS GUIDANCE FOR CHURCH MEMBERS ON HOW TO RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER.**

IT MAKES ME WONDER? DO WE COME TO CLC THINKING:

“I'M GOING TO BE PATIENT TODAY WITH THAT PERSON WHO ANNOYS THE HECK OUT OF ME.”

“I WILL BE KIND TO THAT PERSON WHO USUALLY IS NOT KIND TO ME.”

“I’LL WORK ON NOT BEING ENVIOUS TOWARD PEOPLE IN THE CONGREGATION WHO SEEM TO HAVE EVERYTHING FALL IN THEIR LAPS.”

“I NEED TO BE LESS ANGRY WHEN THINGS HAPPEN I DON’T AGREE WITH.”

“I’M GOING TO TRY TO MAKE CHURCH LESS ABOUT ME AND MORE ABOUT OTHERS.”

AS A CONGREGATION, WE’RE URGED TO HAVE A VISION STATEMENT, A DEFINED PURPOSE, AND A SET OF GOALS. BUT DOES ANYONE EVER SAY: **AS A CONGREGATION LET’S BE A LOVE LAB?** OUR VISION IS TO BE CIVIL, KIND, PATIENT, SELF-EFFACING, CONSIDERATE OF THE OPINIONS OF OTHERS, AND TRUSTING OF THE LEADERSHIP OF THE CONGREGATION. OUR PURPOSE IS TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER RIGHT HERE!

FRANKLY, I CANNOT TELL YOU THE NUMBER OF CLC MEMBERS WHO TELL STORIES FROM THE PAST OF OTHER MEMBERS WHO DID NOT EVEN SAY HELLO TO THEM SUNDAY AFTER SUNDAY. TO ME, THIS IS THE LEAST LOVING ACTION ONE CAN TAKE BECAUSE IT SAYS “YOU ARE INVISIBLE TO ME.” IT SAYS, “IN MY EYES, YOU DO NOT EXIST.” THAT IS HOW FAR SOME PEOPLE ONCE STRAYED FROM PAUL’S VISION OF A CONGREGATION AS A LOVE LAB.

TO PAULS’ LIST, I WOULD ADD: LOVE IS NOT ARROGANT. LOVE IS NOT NARCISSISTIC. LOVE IS NOT DISMISSIVE.

LOVE IS INCLUSIVE. LOVE MEANS THERE IS NO EXPRESSION OF BEING HUMAN THAT DESERVES TO BE DISMISSED.

LOVE MEANS I AM WILLING TO DO THE HARD WORK OF THINKING AND FEELING MY WAY INTO ANOTHER’S PERSON’S LIFE EXPERIENCE. WE CALL THIS EMPATHY, ONE OF THE MOST HEALING EXPRESSIONS OF LOVE.

MY GREATEST TEACHERS ABOUT LIFE AND LOVE HAVE BEEN MY CLIENTS. THEY HAVE TAUGHT ME THAT JUDGMENTS ALWAYS ARE BASED ON SUPERFICIAL, MORALISTIC INTERPRETATIONS OF ANOTHER’S PERSON’S REALITY. JUDGMENTS ARE MORE ABOUT THE PEOPLE MAKING THEM THAN THE PERSON BEING JUDGED. JUDGEMENT MEANS WE MAKE OUR **EXTERNAL** ASSUMPTION ABOUT SOMEONE ELSE’S **INTERNAL** REALITY.

EACH CLIENT, TELLING ME OF THEIR CHILDHOOD AND ADULT EXPERIENCES, THEIR MOTIVATIONS AND INTENTIONS, THEIR VALUE SYSTEM AND THOUGHT PROCESS, MAKES SENSE OF THEIR CHOICES AND DECISIONS, NO MATTER HOW BAD OR WRONG THEY MIGHT SEEM AT FIRST GLANCE. **LOVE DOES NOT DISHONOR OTHERS.**

LUTHER PUT IT LIKE THIS: ALWAYS THINK THE BEST OF YOUR NEIGHBOR AND DEFEND YOUR NEIGHBOR'S GOOD NAME. AND YOUR NEIGHBOR IS FIRST THE PERSON IN THE PEW NEXT TO YOU, IN FRONT OF YOU, IN BACK OF YOU, AND ACROSS FROM YOU.

A CONGREGATION IS ITS OWN MELTING POT WHICH SHOULD BE A SAFE PLACE TO EXPLORE OUR HUMANITY AND THE HUMANITY OF ONE ANOTHER. NOT A GOSSIP AND COMPLAINT FACTORY....

CHRISTIAN LOVE IS NOT A FEELING. ROMANTIC LOVE IS A FEELING. BUT ROMANTIC LOVE IS A KIND OF SHORT-TERM LUNACY THAT MOMENTARILY GLUES TWO PEOPLE TOGETHER SO THE HUMAN RACE CONTINUES.

I FEEL LIKE SHOOTING ANY CLIENT WHO SAYS: "I LOVE HER, BUT I'M NOT **IN** LOVE WITH HER."

THIS SIMPLY MEANS A PERSON FINDS IT DIFFICULT OR IMPOSSIBLE TO TRANSITION FROM THE BUZZ AND THRILL OF ROMANTIC LOVE—THE LOVE OF YEARNING AND HORMONES— TO A MORE MATURE LOVE, WHICH AT ITS GRANDEST IS THE LOVE OF WHICH PAUL SPEAKS—**-AGAPE**. LOVE SO AMAZING THAT IT LEAVES US WITH OUR MOUTH OPEN IN WONDER AND SURPRISE....

BOB WAS IN TROUBLE. HE HAD FORGOTTEN HIS WEDDING ANNIVERSARY. AND HIS WIFE WAS FURIOUS.

"TOMORROW MORNING, I EXPECT TO FIND A GIFT IN THE DRIVEWAY THAT GOES FROM 0 TO 175 IN 6 SECONDS."

THE NEXT MORNING, BOB GOT UP AND LEFT EARLY FOR WORK. WHEN HIS WIFE AWOKE, SHE LOOKED OUT THE WINDOW AND SURE ENOUGH THERE WAS A BOX GIFT-WRAPPED IN THE DRIVEWAY. CONFUSED, SHE PUT ON HER ROBE AND RAN OUTSIDE. SHE OPENED THE BOX AND FOUND A BRAND-NEW BATHROOM SCALE.

BIBLICAL LOVE HAS NO STRINGS ATTACHED. NEW TESTAMENT LOVE HAS NO EXPECTATION OF GETTING SOMETHING IN RETURN.

ALL OF US STRUGGLE WITH THIS, DON'T WE? DIMINISHED LOVE KEEPS SCORE. "I'M DOING MOST OF THE HOUSEHOLD CHORES." "MY CHRISTMAS PRESENTS WERE SO MUCH MORE THOUGHTFUL THAN YOURS." SELF-FOCUSED LOVE LOOKS FOR SOMETHING IN RETURN.

WHEN DEB AND I WERE DATING, I WAS IN THERAPY (NOT BECAUSE WE WERE DATING). AND TOM, MY ANALYST, ASKED ME, "DO YOU KNOW WHAT IT IS THAT DRIVES YOU CRAZY ABOUT DEB?"

I WAS IN THAT BUZZ AND HORMONE STAGE I MENTIONED EARLIER, SO I WAS FLABBERGASTED: "TOM, THIS IS THE MOST INCREDIBLE WOMAN IN THE UNIVERSE!"

TOM REPLIED, "DON'T GET MARRIED UNTIL YOU KNOW WHAT DRIVES YOU CRAZY AND THAT YOU'RE WILLING TO LIVE WITH IT." AN INTERESTING WAY TO TALK ABOUT LOVE, EH?

FROM THE STUDY OF FAMILIES WHERE ADDICTIONS ARE PRESENT, WE COINED THE WORD "CO-DEPENDENCY." ONE OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CO-DEPENDENT LOVE IS THAT IT SECRETLY LOOKS FOR UNACKNOWLEDGED PAYBACK. THERE COMES THE MOMENT, THEN, WHEN WE THEN GET HIT WITH "AFTER ALL I'VE DONE FOR YOU" OR "LOOK HOW I'VE SACRIFICED FOR YOU!"

CO-DEPENDENCY APPEARS TO BE LOVE, BUT IT IS MORE ABOUT CONTROLLING SOMEONE ELSE'S BEHAVIOR....

MY FIRST CONGREGATION IN SHENDOAH, VIRGINIA, SAT ON A WELL-TRAVELED STATE ROUTE. I LOST COUNT OF THE NUMBER OF DRIVERS WHO NOT ONLY STOPPED AT THE CHURCH NEEDING GAS MONEY BUT, TAKING MY NAME AND ADDRESS, PROMISED TO PAY ME BACK. NOT ONE EVER DID.

I FINALLY CAME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT JESUS NEVER TOLD US TO DO A BACKGROUND CHECK ON PEOPLE WHO NEED ASSISTANCE, THAT I NEEDED TO LOSE MY NAIVETE, BELIEVING THESE PEOPLE WERE TELLING ME THE TRUTH, AND GIVE PEOPLE ASSISTANCE ONLY IF I WANTED TO WITH NO EXPECTATION OF PAYBACK ATTACHED.

LOVE IS THE WILLINGNESS, THE CONSCIOUS DECISION, TO EXTEND OURSELVES FOR THE WELL-BEING OF OTHER PEOPLE WITH NO EXPECTATION OF ANYTHING IN RETURN. WHETHER IT IS A STRANGER, A NEIGHBOR, OUR SPOUSE, OUR CHILD, OR A FELLOW CHURCH MEMBER. WE LOVE BECAUSE WE LOVE BECAUSE WE LOVE. END OF STORY.

FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE, WE CONSTANTLY WILL FIND OURSELVES WORKING WITH OUR DARKER EMOTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES.

HERE IS ONE OF THE IMPORTANT TRUTHS I KNOW: IF WE BEGIN WITH SPIRITUALITY, WE END UP IN PSYCHOLOGY. IF WE BEGIN WITH PSYCHOLOGY, WE END UP IN SPIRITUALITY.

SO, WE COME TO UNDERSTAND WHAT JESUS AND PAUL ARE TALKING ABOUT WHEN IT COMES TO SPIRITUAL LOVE: THE WILLINGNESS, THE CONSCIOUS DECISION, TO EXTEND OURSELVES FOR THE WELL-BEING OF ANOTHER PERSON, WE FIND OURSELVES DEALING WITH OUR DARKER PSYCHOLOGY: RESENTMENT, OUR OWN NARCISSISM, OUR DESIRE FOR RECOGNITION, OUR ANGER, OUR HURT, OUR OWN JUDGEMENTAL NATURE, OUR IRRITATION, AND SO ON.

MANY OF US GET IN DIFFICULTY WITH THIS LOVE THING IS THAT WE REFUSE TO BE HONEST IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS. WE FEAR THAT TELLING THE TRUTH WILL HURT THE OTHER PERSON AND THIS WILL NOT BE LOVING. WE ARE USUALLY ALSO AFRAID OF GETTING ANGER IN RETURN FOR TELLING THE TRUTH.

DEB COMES HOME WITH YET ANOTHER HAIR COLOR AND ASKS ME WHAT I THINK AND I RESPOND, "THAT'S AN INTRIGUING COLOR." UNTIL I FINALLY GET UP THE NERVE TO TELL HER, "I BEG YOU. PLEASE DO NOT EVER BE A BLONDE AGAIN."

PAUL IS HELPFUL HERE, TOO. "SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE." I'M NOT SAYING THIS IS EASY, BUT IT IS OUR WORK AS CHRISTIANS. SO HOW DO WE SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE TO ONE ANOTHER?

IN MY SECOND CONGREGATION, I INHERITED AN ORGANIST WHO WAS APPROACHING EIGHTY WITH ONE LEG THAT NO LONGER WORKED. MADE FOR INTERESTING SOUNDS ON THE PEDALS. SHE COULD BARELY SEE THE KEYBOARD AND WAS A BACKBITING, IRRITABLE PERSON. BUT EVERYONE TIPTOED AROUND HER. NO ONE WANTED TO HURT HER FEELINGS, WHICH BECAME MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE HUNDRED PLUS PEOPLE AT WORSHIP WHO WERE HAVING A MISERABLE WORSHIP EXPERIENCE.

HOW DOES ONE SAY IN LOVE YOU NO LONGER ARE ABLE TO PLAY THE ORGAN? IT WAS LEFT TO ME AND LED TO MY FIRST PUBLISHED ARTICLE: "IVE GOT THE GOT-TO-FIRE-MY-ORGANIST-WHO-IS-A-MEMBER BLUES."

IF WE ARE A HEALTHY FAITH COMMUNITY, WE ARE UNITED IN SOMETHING BIGGER THAN OURSELVES. CLC IS MEANT TO BE A "WE" EXPERIENCE, SUBMITTING TO A LARGER REALITY THAN OUR INDIVIDUAL FEELINGS. AND SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE TO ONE ANOTHER IS MEANT TO SERVE THAT BIGGER VISION, PURPOSE, AND REALITY....

FOR ME, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT CONCEPTS IN UNDERSTANDING MATURE BIBLICAL LOVE IS THE CONCEPT OF GENERATIVITY, ILLUSTRATED BY THIS STORY:

IN THE ILLINOIS CONGREGATION I SERVED PART-TIME FOR FIFTEEN YEARS, WE HAD STARTED A CONTEMPORARY SERVICE, BUT WE HAD AN ANTIQUATED SOUND SYSTEM. ONE SUNDAY WE PLAYED "GO REST HIGH ON THAT MOUNTAIN," A SONG VINCE GILL WROTE ABOUT THE UNTIMELY DEATH OF HIS BROTHER.

CATHARINE FLESSNER, A MEMBER IN HER LATE EIGHTIES, WAS IN CHURCH THAT SUNDAY AND LOVED THAT SONG. AFTER THE SERVICE, KNOWING OF OUR NEED FOR A SOUND SYSTEM AND MIXING BOARD, SHE GAVE ME A BLACK CHECK TO BUY WHATEVER WE NEEDED. THAT COST HER A LITTLE OVER \$10,000.

I THINK SHE WAS IN CHURCH THE DAY WE FIRST USED THE NEW SOUND SYSTEM AND THEN NEVER AGAIN UNTIL THE DAY OF HER FUNERAL. THIS IS GENERATIVITY: USING OUR PERSONAL RESOURCES—TIME, MONEY, TALENTS, ENERGY—FOR THE GENERATIONS COMING AFTER US. CATHARINE DID NOT BENEFIT IN ANY WAY FROM HER GIFT OF \$10,000. BUT THOSE WHO FOLLOWED HER ARE BENEFITTING TO THIS DAY.

IT IS GENERATIVE WHEN WE PUT OUR MONEY, TIME, TALENTS, AND ENERGY WHERE OUR MOUTHS ARE THE SAKE OF KEVEN AND ZAC, COLIN AND JACOB, DANNY AND MEGAN, LUNA AND ROSE, PAIGE AND DREW, AND ALL OUR CHILDREN AND YOUTH, THE CHILDREN WHO HAVE YET TO DARKEN OUR DOORS. NOT WHAT WORKS FOR YOU AND ME A WHAT WE HOPE WILL WORK FOR THEM.

LASTLY, KNOW THAT WHEN I PREACH, I AM THE NUMBER ONE PERSON I AM PREACHING TO. SOMETIMES I DON'T RESPOND ALL THAT WELL TO THOSE WHO ARE NOT KIND OR PATIENT WITH ME. I SOMETIMES DON'T DO THAT WELL WITH OTHERS' ANGER OR THEIR RECORD-KEEPING OF MY PERCEIVED WRONGS.

I AM JUST AS MUCH A WORK IN PROGRESS. YET IT IS MY CALLING TO HOLD UP THE SCRIPTURES, BOTH ACCEPTING US FOR WHO WE ARE AND CALLING US TO A HIGHER CALLING.

TO END WITH PAUL'S IMAGE, WE ARE TO PUT THE WAYS OF CHILDHOOD BEHIND US, WHICH ARE IMMATURE, UNDEVELOPED, DEFENSIVE WAYS OF RELATING. WE ARE TO GROW UP INTO BEING ADULTS WHO ARE COMMITTED TO THESE CHRISTIANS IDEALS OF BEING A FAITH COMMUNITY.

**JUST THE WAY YOU ARE** BY BILLY JOEL