

## **Without Love We Are Nothing**

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourth Sunday in ordinary time, February 1, 1998. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Last Thursday a group of ministers met at our house under the pretext of studying the Bible and praying. We began to discuss the situation in Iraq. "Should we bomb Iraq?" One minister said, "Well, we gotta do something. This has been going on for so long." Another said: "Bombing is the only language Hussein will understand." A third said, "What would be a distinctively Christian response to Saddam Hussein?" One minister said, "Well, we could send a thousand Mother Theresa's to Iraq." "They'd have to speak Arabic and be sensitive to Iraqi culture. They couldn't just be American Christians. They'd have to be Asian and African Christians as well as European Christians and they'd have to put aside every hint of nationalism." We all agreed that would be a uniquely Christian response. But, "It will never happen. The State Department wouldn't let Christians go and Iraq would never agree to let Christian missionaries in and if they got there, they'd all be killed." Finally another minister said, "The real reason it won't happen is because the Christian church doesn't have a thousand Mother Therasas. We no longer believe in the power of love. We don't believe that the Gospel is more powerful than bombs."

In the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians Paul outlines a distinctly Christian response to conflict. Christians in ancient Corinth, like so many Christians today, didn't get along with one another. They were deeply divided. They argued over who had the most valuable spiritual gifts. They argued over theology. Some didn't even believe in the resurrection. A sex scandal had divided the Corinthian Church. Powerful personalities threatened to destroy the unity of the church. In that kind of situation St. Paul writes, "If I have the most spectacular charismatic gifts but don't have love I'm nothing. And if I have intellectual powers to understand all the mysteries of theology, and if I have a practical, down to earth faith that makes things happen, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I am the number one giver in the church and wear myself

going to committees and Bible studies and Presbytery meetings but have not love, I gain nothing.”

*ettes: Stros, Storge, Philos, agape*

The first thing he says about this distinctively Christian approach to conflict is that love is patient. Many of us are impatient. Impatient with our kids. Impatient with spouses. Impatient with colleagues. Impatient with politicians. Impatient with the church. We're inclined to rank patience as a very minor virtue. We don't like standing in lines. We don't like the busy signal telling us we can't get on the Internet. We're impatient when our friends make the same mistakes over and over. But Paul says that love is patient. But how patient is love? Were we too patient with Germany before W.W.II? Does patience have any limits? What about the woman in an abusive relationship with someone she loves? Do we tell her to just hang in there and be patient until she suffers serious injury or even death? It's not good or loving to be patient in all situations. Just how patient is love?

Well, listen to three stories. Two have to do with patience in a family setting. The third has to do with patience between nations in conflict.

First, the story of James and Alice Ettison. James Ettison was a salesman. Alice was a gentle and lovely woman who fell in love with him. She was absolutely certain that she could fulfill all of his deepest desires. They got married. They were happy. For two years. Then, on a cold November night, Alice's car skidded on a stretch of black ice. She ran head on, full speed, into a car coming from the other direction. Alice survived the accident but she hovered between life and death for a year. She was never the same. She was paralyzed from her hips down. Months of recovery passed into years. Alice sometimes sank into deep depression. James quit his traveling job right after the accident. He got work near home. He made taking care of Alice almost a full time job. Nobody ever heard James complain about the deck of cards he'd been dealt. Alice died fifteen years after the accident. Somebody asked James how he'd done it. "How could you be so patient when you got so little in return from you wife?" He said he'd never thought about it that much. But when people continued to press him James would say: "I just loved her." Love is patient.

Story two: Eric and Karen Zorg married later in life. Karen loved her husband, Eric, dearly. For fifteen years they enjoyed an idyllic marriage. Eric was her best friend. He was her lover. But fifteen years into their marriage Eric became plagued with memory lapses. He'd forget names and dates. We all forget names and dates but Eric's lapses of memory were far more serious than normal. For a couple of years they continued to enjoy vacations and quiet evenings at home but Eric progressively got worse. The equality of their marriage broke down. He no longer could carry his share of the emotional, spiritual and physical load of the marriage. The lights in his mind slowly were turned off until he lived in total mental darkness.

The physical and mental stress began to take their toll on Karen. Eric would call out, "Karen." And she'd come running over and over. Then he stopped calling out her name. He no longer even recognized Karen. For the last year he hasn't said a word. His eyes stare vacantly. Karen maneuvers small spoonfuls of mush into his mouth several times a day. She cleans his diapers every day. She sleeps restlessly with him every night. She wonders if he dreams. She wonders if he is still in there someplace hiding. She tells him every day, "I love you." But he stopped responding years ago. Why doesn't she seek a new lover to meet her physical, sexual, and emotional needs? Nobody would really hold it against her. There are cynics who say that Karen does what she does only because she's afraid of what other people say. Maybe so. But knowing Karen - I think it's because her parents were very patient with her when she was growing up. Patient with her during her rebellious teen age years. Patient with her as she went from one failed relationship to another. Patient because they loved her. Karen was taught, from the time she was a little girl, that love is patient.

Story three: A different kind of story. It's an ancient story. It's the story of Jonah and Nineveh. Nineveh was the Iraq of the ancient world. In fact, Nineveh was located within the boundaries of modern Iraq. Nineveh was sending the equivalent of scud missiles to level the nation of Israel. Nineveh had developed stockpiles of the equivalent of chemical and biological weapons. Should God take the hard line against godless Nineveh? Should he use his first-strike capability and smash the violent city? Or should he wait, hold back the divine wrath, and give

the city a chance to repent? Jonah wants God to take the first option. Jonah believes that Nineveh understands only the language of bombs. Jonah also suspects that God is really a soft-hearted liberal who's going to end up sparing Nineveh, so he runs away. God, however, won't let Jonah run away. He sends Jonah to Nineveh as the world's most reluctant missionary. So Jonah went to Nineveh and preached, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." And Nineveh repented! From the king on down to the slave, the whole city of Nineveh repented. Nineveh stands not only for Iraq, but for <sup>Dallas, Baghdad</sup> Washington, Moscow, Berlin, Peking, all the great centers of power. The conversion of Nineveh tells us that there's hope for us, as well, to repent before we're destroyed.

The story of Jonah is really a story of the patience of God's love. Why does God let human history go on when everything seems so wrong in it? Why does he wait so long to burn it all up in his wrath? The story of Jonah is a parable of the truth expressed by St. Paul when he said that love is patient. Love moves God to put up with things awhile longer for the sake of people: ~~God gives people a chance to turn from sin and evil and to turn to Christ.~~ Love doesn't rush to judgment - either in international or national crises. There will always be far more people among us to demand first-strike power to destroy the enemy. There will always be more people who believe that God wants America to be the agent of his wrath against his enemies. But let Christians consider a distinctly Christian response to conflicts in the world, in the nation, and in our communities. We've learned about the patience of love first hand from the cross of Christ. Let's talk of giving peace a chance.

Let us pray: Give us, O God, patience to speak good news to those who oppose us, and to help those who may rage against us, so that, following in the way of your son, we may rejoice even when rejected, trusting in your perfect love which never fails; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.