

The Centrality of Love

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson on the Fourth Sunday After Epiphany, February 2, 1986 at Knox Presbyterian Church, Kenmore, NY. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71; *1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13*; Luke 4:21-32.

Love is a feeling to be learned. About 20 years ago I read a book by that title. It was written for people who thought they were in love. The author, Walter Trobisch, said that love is something that we must learn. It's like language or walking. We don't know instinctively how to love one another. We need to learn how to love. That understanding of love seems to be the one spoken of by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. Love is something that we learn to do before we can begin to feel it. If I learn to be patient with someone and work hard at it; if I act kind towards someone I don't really like, and if I work at this, slowly, love as a feeling arises.

~~Love is central to the whole Bible. Our eternal salvation depends on~~ whether we love. We're saved by a faith that works love St. Paul wrote. How can we say we love God whom we can't see, if we don't act in love towards people we can see, St. John wrote. Nowhere is the centrality of love spoken of more beautifully than in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul was writing to a church that was rich in all sorts of spiritual gifts. Some enjoyed the ecstasy of speaking in tongues. Some exercised the gift of healing. They had faith that could move mountains. They hoped for Christ's return with confidence. It was an evangelistic church. Apparently the Corinthian church was rapidly growing, teeming with all sorts of young people converted out of a pagan culture. Their worship was lively and they fellowshiped together regularly at church dinners. But there was a serious flaw in the Corinthian church which called into question everything else.

There was an incredible lack of love in this church. Christians were taking one another to court. There were jealous factions within the church

that divided them. Many were proud of their spiritual gifts and knowledge and looked down on others. Some were incredibly insensitive to the needs of others in the congregation. At the church pot luck dinners the old timers brought five course dinners which they greedily devoured with friends they had known for years. If they noticed the new people at all it was simply to comment on how these new people weren't as spiritually motivated as members used to be. They didn't know as much about the Bible. They weren't as committed to the church programs. The standards for church membership were just not what they used to be. The new comers and peripheral members came to the church dinners with little or no food. They sat alone and ate what they brought, and went home hungry. Now if you had asked the old timers, "Is your church a loving church?"

~~They would say, "Yes".~~ Some of the newer members might also agree. But many felt left out and ignored.

I wonder how many of us go away from our services every week hungry, not for food, but for love. Knox church is rich in many ways. We have a wonderful heritage. Many of you have a deep knowledge of the Bible. You have a beautiful building with spacious classrooms. Look at this beautiful sanctuary with its wood paneling and stained glass windows. Listen to our tremendous choir. We're one of the largest congregations in our Presbytery. We give nearly a third of our budget to missions and many of you tithe.

The incredible thing is that we can have so many good qualities while at the same time have so many men and women hurting inside because they don't feel loved or appreciated ~~by husband or wife, by children or parents, by fellow Christians.~~ The incredible thing is that we can know Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior, know the Bible, and yet find it very

difficult to express love for *some* others. We can be so sensitive to the needs of some, and so insensitive to the needs of others.

I know that you love one another. If there's a tragedy among you that love is beautifully expressed. Food is brought. Phone calls are made. Offers of help come pouring in. But the true test of love is when there are *no* tragedies, when there are *no* crises; a month after the funeral or the divorce when everything has gotten back to normal. The true test of love in our families is not during crises, but during the every day, often times, petty events of our daily lives. ~~Love is expressed~~ The true test of love is seen in what we fail to do. Love fails, not so much when we get angry and irritated with one another and shout back and forth; love one another they start telling everything that's happened to them; ~~Love must express and communicate itself. When two people begin to~~ have fails, more often, simply by not doing anything; ~~not every detail of their daily life. They reveal themselves to each other, saying anything to the one we love,~~ ~~unburden themselves and exchange confidences.~~ When I come home from working in my study Kay will ask, "How was your day?" I'm satisfied with simply saying, "O.K." But because she loves me she doesn't let me alone until I've told her just about every detail in my work-day. God's love for us is like that. He wants us to tell us about the details in our lives in our prayers. And he expresses his love. He came to us through a real flesh and blood, person, Jesus Christ. He still comes to us today through the flesh and blood people who make up the Body of Christ in the world. He gives himself. He shares his secrets. He invites us into his heart.

The incredible thing is that we can hear sermons on love and agree 100% and say, "That was a tremendous sermon" and yet drive home in silence unaware of the pain in the heart of the person sitting next to us in the car and go through the week never saying one thing of personal significance to husband or wife or son or daughter or friend. The incredible thing is that we can tithe, we can witness to our next door

~~neighbor, we can speak with the tongues of angels and yet be incredibly insensitive to a fellow member of Christ's body who is now sitting a few inches away from you.~~

~~How our hearts would sing if we could learn better how to love. Jesus has given us His Spirit to heal the sick, to bind up the broken hearted, to set free those who are imprisoned. Healing, forgiveness, new life, all these gifts he has given us but they are nothing without the kind of love that is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude. If we could learn to love the flood gates of the Holy Spirit would be released and we would all sing for joy.~~

In *The Seed and the Sower*, Laurens Van der Post, a South African novelist, tells the moving stories of two brothers. The elder brother was strong, tall, intelligent, an excellent athlete and good student. His parents sent him away to a private school in South Africa where he quickly made a name for himself. He became a respected leader among his class-mates. He was looked up to. His brother was six years younger. He wasn't good looking or especially intelligent *and* he was a hunchback. But he had one great gift. He had a magnificent voice and could sing like a nightingale.

Eventually the younger brother joined the elder at the same boarding school. When he got there he was greeted by a cruel mob of school boys who ganged up on him and made fun of him. They mocked him. They beat him up. They tore off his shirt to reveal his hunchback. The older brother was aware of what was going on. He could have gone out and face this mob of cruel, sadistic students. He was an old timer in the school with a lot of personal authority. One word from him would've put a stop to the whole scene. He was a leader. He could've gone out there and said that this strange, deformed boy was his brother. But instead he remained in the

chemistry laboratory doing his work, ashamed of his brother. *He betrayed his brother by what he failed to do.* He betrayed his brother by refusing to go out with love when the other needed it.

Well, the younger brother survived the ordeal but he was never the same again. He never became a real part of the school. He kept to himself and, most significantly, he stopped singing. Finally he left the school altogether and went back home. Meanwhile the older brother had become a soldier in WW II. He was stationed in Palestine. One night, lying outdoors gazing into the starlit night, he realized what he had done to his younger brother in their school days. His heart told him that he would never have peace until he went home and asked his brother for forgiveness. And so he made the incredibly difficult wartime journey from Palestine to South Africa and sought out his brother. They talked long into the night. He confessed how he had betrayed him by what he had *not* done. They cried together. They embraced. The breach between them was healed. And something else happened that night. As the older brother was falling asleep he heard the beautiful voice of his younger brother singing once again.

There are people near you who haven't sung for years. They're in these pews. They're in your office. They're in your class room. They're in your factory. They're in your Sunday School class. They may be in your living room this afternoon or in your bedroom tonight. They haven't sung for years. *The tragic thing is that you may not have even noticed.* Let your heart speak to you. Think of those around you. Your noticing them may enable them to sing again. Your concrete expressions of love for them may awaken love within them for you and this church. Love is a feeling to be learned. It isn't something that comes naturally. You've got to work at

being a loving church and a loving people.

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."

Let us pray: Almighty Father, whose blessed Son before his passion prayed for his disciples that they might be one, as you and he are one: Grant that your Church, being bound together in love and obedience to you, may be united in one body by the one Spirit, that the world may believe in him whom you have sent, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.