

Valentine's Day Sermon
"Willing to Love"
1 Corinthians 13:1-7
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Deer Creek Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity Presbyterian Church
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There's an old saying that goes "the more things change, the more they stay the same." I was always confused by that statement but after serving the church for over half a century, it's meaning has become much clearer. That's because when I see how fractured and divided the MODERN church has become- culturally and politically AS WELL AS theologically, I can understand why with each passing year, increasing numbers of persons continue to defect from her ranks, why so many people are no longer calling themselves Baptists or Methodists or even Presbyterians and now identify with the more generic designation of "SPIRITUAL" instead. The fact is that the Church--the Body of Jesus Christ--remains more divided THAN EVER whether it's over such issues as abortion, sexual orientation, race, or issues of war and peace to name just a few. For proof, look no further than this year's bipartisan National Prayer Breakfast that was held in the Capitol Building this past Thursday. It appeared the ONLY love experienced at that event occurred during the opening prayer after which the REST of the meeting ended with lawmakers on both sides of the political aisle yelling and throwing insults at one another. In that regard, we CONTINUE to be a very human, very fallible institution. But then, the Church of Jesus Christ has NEVER pretended to be a bastion of perfect peace and unity as this morning's lesson will testify.

Honestly, I can't remember having performed a wedding when 1st Corinthians 13--Paul's famous "love chapter" to the Corinthian church--has NOT been read or alluded to in some form. The great Apostle was addressing one of a series of conflicts that had beset the church divided over such issues as leadership, sexual immorality, personal conduct, spiritual gifts, and questions regarding the resurrection. Thus, you can see how despite all the transformations and reformations the church has endured during the past two thousand years, not a whole lot really HAS changed, HAS it? Faced with various schisms within the church, Paul recognized that the most important quality of all MISSING from their lives was LOVE. Thus, he takes time to remind them of the absolute necessity of "love" being the very reason they were called in the FIRST place; that if they ever FORGOT this most essential truth, then they will have forgotten EVERYTHING he told them and EVERYTHING that was of greatest consequence to them!

Paul begins by describing a series of situations or scenarios which might APPEAR as though love is the motivating factor when it really ISN'T. For instance, you might be able to speak in tongues as the disciples did on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon them in the Upper Room, but if there is no love there, then you are just a noisy disturbance to people. If you possess the gifts of prophecy and knowledge and even the faith to say to this mountain, "Be ye removed" and instantly it is done BUT HAVE NOT LOVE, then in God's eyes your faith is actually useless. And if you are charitable enough to give away everything you own and are even willing to sacrifice your body in the name of some higher good BUT HAVE NOT LOVE, then you are simply wasting your effort, REGARDLESS how noble it might seem.

The Rev. Richard Williamson, an English Bishop affiliated with a breakaway Catholic sect—the Society of St. Pius X—suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died this past week. He

graduated from Cambridge University and worked as a journalist and teacher before embracing Catholicism and becoming a priest in 1976. But for any good he may have accomplished in his life, much of it was undone by his fervently antisemitic views, even denying that the Holocaust ever took place, causing him to be stripped of his priestly duties and excommunicated- not once but TWICE by the Vatican. This goes to show that you can even be a highly educated minister of the Gospel and a professing servant of our Lord's Church and yet be devoid of the very thing your ministry was supposed to be ALL ABOUT- LOVE!

In the next series of verses, he continues to lay out what LOVE IS by describing what it IS NOT. He says love is not envious; it is not boastful or arrogant. Love is not rude, that is, always insisting on its own way first. Love is never irritable or resentful. Love doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the right. But then he shifts gears by moving away from what love is NOT to insisting what love IS, and in v. 7, he makes the sweeping statement that "love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Of all the statements he makes concerning "love" in this chapter, this PARTICULAR verse is the one I happen to find the MOST DIFFICULT. Let's look at each assertion individually. He says love "BEARS" all things. Well what does this mean? I have seen it interpreted that love "bears up" under all things, that is, that it gives one the capacity to endure a lot that others haven't the patience for. Certainly there's much truth to that for one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is "patience," the ability to quietly wait when everyone else is clamoring for some kind of action. A loving spirit is indeed helpful when putting up with a crying baby or a belligerent friend. But how about a spouse who consistently cheats on you or a son who time and again lies to you and even steals from you? Can you call that loving just to "grin and "bear" it when your trust is violated over and over by someone you dearly care about? Though "love covers a multitude of sins" as the scriptures say, there has got to be a limit, right? After all, love shouldn't have to make you a doormat to others.

Rather, when it says that love "bears" all things, I believe it is saying something ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT- that love bears in the sense of "carries" all things, that is, that it gives one the capacity to carry other people's burdens. Burdens are never meant to be carried alone but borne by others so as to make whatever that burden is much lighter and more manageable. Since Rose fell two months ago while walking the dog which resulted in her tearing the muscles in her right shoulder, I have been serving as her nursemaid- helping her get dressed, doing most of the cooking and cleaning around the house, and feeding and looking after the dog. Well this past Thursday, she finally had it operated on which means that for the next four to six months, I'll CONTINUE to serve as her load bearer- caring for her every need in order to make her life as easy and stress-free until her shoulder has completely healed. And you won't see me grumbling or complaining about it either but trying to be ever so patient and careful with her because THAT'S WHAT LOVE DOES.

This is why Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."(Matt. 11:28-29) Love enables one to carry the cross of another's sorrow so that he or she is never overwhelmed in his or her grief. Just the knowledge that someone is there- concerned, waiting, prayerful, can mean all the difference in the world to the one who must contend with a heart broken in two. And this is to once again imitate our Lord of whom the prophet Isaiah said, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows."(Isaiah

53:4) Yes, TRUE love is always willing to put aside one's own convenience to help shoulder someone else's cross.

But Paul says that not only does love "bear" all things, it also "BELIEVES" all things. What does this mean? After all, we call someone who "believes all things" simple or naïve, don't we? Only children believe everything that's told to them whether it's Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy- but an ADULT! Doesn't Jesus himself say for us to be as wise as wolves as well as innocent as doves? Again, I think Paul is talking about something else entirely. I think it means that love is willing to believe in someone even when everyone else has given up on that person. All of us have probably been fooled or hurt so many times by a friend or family member that we've simply written that person off as too incorrigible or no good. "He has an evil seed" we will sometimes say. Well love is willing to take a chance on someone even when the cold, hard realist might never give that person a second glance.

When I was the minister of First Pres in downtown Waterloo, Iowa, I received a letter from a young black man named Demarl Jones who at the time was an inmate in the Iowa prison system. He had gotten a hold of my name somehow and wanted to make a connection; he wanted share his story of how God had changed his life since he began his incarceration. I responded to his letter with one of my own telling him how I wanted to hear more about who he was but I ESPECIALLY wanted to hear about his faith. During a series of exchanges that lasted for a number of months, he spoke with great earnestness about his love for Jesus and shared how the Bible studies he had immersed himself in not only helped to deepen it but pointed his life in a positive new direction. In every letter, he would thank me profusely for believing in him when nobody else would. He also said he would be getting out soon and wondered if when they dropped him off at the Waterloo bus station, I'd be there to meet him and drive him to the residential facility that would become his new home, which I eventually did.

In time, Demarl became one of our most dedicated parishioners. The congregation responded by surrounding him with their love- even helping him to find his own place and providing much of the furniture and appliances he would need to get settled. One day, he came to me and asked if I would baptize him, which I told him would be my great honor to do. Not long afterwards, he was formally admitted into the church as a new member. I will never forget his excitement about it. He even kept a large framed picture of me baptizing him hanging on his living room wall to remind him how special that moment had become for him. What I found to be MOST humbling, however, was how he never stopped telling everyone how much he loved Rose and me and that he regarded me as his spiritual father.

You see, love constantly reminds us that ALL of us are created in God's image and loved by him EQUALLY. God doesn't love ME one whit better or more than he does a murderer on death row- love tells us that there's hope for EVERYONE in this world. It sees the person beneath the facts and believes that that person is of inestimable worth, that he is redeemable and CAN become good. As God is never willing to give up on US despite how sordid our lives may sometimes become, then neither can WE ever give up on any other. Love is willing to believe all things and this includes that God can do an amazing work even in what may appear to be the HARDEST of human hearts.

But Paul continues. He says that love not only "bears" all things and "believes" all things, it also "HOPES" all things. Love is intimately tied to the notion of hope, as love is the POWER of hope- as long as a person is loved and can love in return, there is ALWAYS hope.

However, once that love DISAPPEARS, then so goes that hope, and when HOPE is gone, we are left with nothing but CYNICISM AND DESPAIR. For Christians, the basis of our hope--even as our love--lies in Jesus Christ, when our heart and mind become fixed on the promise of his final victory which we know will triumph over all that hurts and kills. He gives us the courage to praise today and live with expectancy tomorrow even when to everyone else, the situation seems so dark and uncertain. Hope looks beyond the reality of the moment to see promise when nobody else can. Therefore, we can walk expectantly and optimistically into the future knowing that we never travel alone, that there is always one there who loves us and walks beside us, providing us with the assurance that he will assist us every step along the way.

Paul finally adds that love also “ENDURES” all things. Love gives us the power to cope, to endure everything that life can throw at us- whether for good OR for ill. The Bible doesn’t teach us to ESCAPE our problems or the problems in the world. Rather, it teaches us to ENDURE them, to FIGHT through them with faith and hope and courage knowing that God is squarely in our corner. You need proof of that? On January 12th, 2010, a terrible earthquake struck Port-Au-Prince, Haiti and 300,000 of her residents were killed within but a couple of minutes. What sustained that nation throughout the days following--a country that is 80% Roman Catholic--was her Christian faith, even when the food and water and emergency crews remained in short supply. You could hike through the earthquake-rubbed streets of Port-au-Prince any night and hear people singing songs with lyrics like “O Lord, keep me close to you” and “Forgive me, Jesus.” You would have seen preachers standing atop boxes and giving impromptu sermons, reassuring their listeners in the dark: “It SEEMS like the Good Lord is hiding, but he’s here. He’s ALWAYS here.” On Sundays, the Episcopal bishop could be found holding services on the steps of a one-story building on the school ground—a structure that looks to be the most solid around. The altar was a dilapidated wooden folding table, draped with a white cloth and from behind it he would remind his congregation, “We must keep the faith, knowing that God is with us, in the good as well as in the bad days.” Yes, love, even love shaken by a devastating earthquake which reduced the population of Haiti by over a quarter of a million persons, can enable us to endure ALL things regardless of what this world hands us.

When I think of this verse and Paul’s claim that love is able to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things, I realize that there is one truth that undergirds all four of these assertions- that love is foremost an ACT OF THE WILL. Love must never be confused with a feeling or an emotion. There is nothing more fleeting or unstable than our emotions and if THEY were the essence of human love, it would NEVER be able to bear or believe or hope or endure ANYTHING. Rather, love is not so much an emotion we are easily swept up in as it is something we DECIDE and DO. We give ourselves to this business of love only by setting aside our absorption in our own feelings and desires for happiness and make it AN ACT OF THE WILL. Love is first and foremost A COMMITMENT OF TRUST- one involving a conscious decision by both parties to constantly work at their relationship that over time it might grow and mature.

When I conduct a wedding, I don’t ask the couple before all their family and friends, “Do you love each other?” I’m not so concerned about how they FEEL toward each other as I am the kind of COMMITMENT each is willing to make to his or her partner. That’s why my question to them is always, “WILL you love this person, for rich or for poor, in joy or in sorrow, in sickness and in health, till death do you part?” In other words, WILL you, in the presence of God and this congregation, take love upon you as A RESPONSIBILITY? I’m asking them for

an “ACT OF THEIR WILL.” THAT’S the structure of married love, and this is important because marriage ought never to be negotiated on ANYTHING LESS than a commitment of COMPLETE FIDELITY to the other person. This is the pattern, the example for all faithful relationships- to assume responsibility for someone else other than yourself. Where romantic love is often an irresponsible and uncommitted love, MATURE love involves being there for that other person even when you don’t feel like it. This is why Jesus pushes the art of love well beyond that of loving just your family and friends (and even loving THEM can often be quite a challenge), but to go so far as to say that you must love also your ENEMIES- love THEM as you would YOURSELF. Where your feelings may be contemptuous, even hateful toward your enemies--love, as an act of will--forces you to disregard how you feel to make a genuine effort at reconciliation, even with someone who might hate YOU. I can’t repeat ENOUGH, love is a dedication of oneself through trust and commitment. It involves a willingness to use our capacity for generosity, altruism, empathy, service, self-sacrifice, and devotion to transcend our own narrow interests and selfish concerns in the interest of someone OTHER than ourselves.

I think most of you are aware that for the first twenty years of my ministry, I was a single man and that it wasn’t until I had just turned 53 that I walked down that aisle MYSELF for the very first time. In fact, Rose and I will be celebrating our nineteenth wedding anniversary this coming August. When we first became engaged, I made a special prayer to God- one that I never even shared with Rose. I asked God to give me such a love for this person who I expected to be my partner for the rest of my life that I would come to love her with all my heart and mind and soul and spirit. I wanted to learn to love her more than I loved my own life, more than anyone else in the entire world- THAT was the kind of love I wanted to have for her. As with any marriage, the first couple of years were the hardest. Because we were both of middle-age and set in our ways, we had to learn to compromise and make concessions if our relationship was going to last- ESPECIALLY with me having been so free and independent for most of my adult life. Learning how to live with another person was almost like learning to walk and talk ALL OVER AGAIN!

Well, I think I can truthfully say that after almost 20 years of marriage, we’re still learning things about each other and in the process, our relationship has continued to grow stronger with each passing day. However, the most IMPORTANT lesson I have learned is that love is not something God mysteriously and supernaturally deposits into your heart, as though you wake up one morning and suddenly you discover this unconditional love for the person lying next to you in bed; it is NEVER that easy. Rather, love is something that must be WILLED into being. We WILLINGLY grow into love when we consciously and volitionally use the various spiritual gifts and resources that God places at our disposal such as the so-called “gifts of the Holy Spirit”: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. To the extent we apply them in our lives and in our relationships, only THEN can we get beyond the shallowness of much romantic love and begin to grow into a deeper and more lasting MATURE love. Love is something that must be WORKED at by both parties if it is ever going to develop. It is only when we are intentionally patient and kind and good and faithful and gentle with each other that we will then, like Christ and like the Apostle Paul, be able to “bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.” Only THEN will we discover and experience God’s goal of UNCONDITIONAL love for our lives- the SAME manner of love that the Father has for the Son, the SAME kind of love he has never stopped showing to you and to me. Let us pray...

Father God, help us day-by-day to grow in our love for each other and may it be modeled on the same kind of love you have for each of US- a love that is patient and kind and selfless and unconditional. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.