

“Living Love”

January 28, 2007

I Cor. 13:1-13

San Dimas Community UCC

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At our Wed. morning Bible study I really liked Doris Hutcheson's comment about our scripture today. She said something like this, "I'm kind of glad the church at Corinth had trouble or else Paul wouldn't have written this letter to them, and we wouldn't have these beautiful words." I agree. And these are not only beautiful words; they are strong, powerful words with a message that requires of us our very best as human beings.

You may recall that last week Paul is writing a congregation for whom he cares deeply has heard that they are on an ego trip. They are celebrate how special they are as a church. They are actually debating over which spiritual gifts are of the highest quality. They are all caught up with their goodness (rather than their Godness) as church. And Paul ends that chapter with the words, but "let me show you a more excellent way."

Then he describes love in the deepest and most comprehensive level, and his main point is that all you do, even the good things you do, are nothing at all, IF they are not done out of love. He lists some striking examples: speaking in tongues, prophesying, working miracles, and ascetic self-deprivation, all religious practices are totally useless without love. Without love as the basis of religious practice, Paul says your religion is worthless. Corinth was known for its bronze vessels, and the noisy gong was likely a reference to large bronze vases that would be positioned in a theatre so as to amplify the voices of the actors. They were noise makers. The clanging cymbals were such as were used in frenzied pagan worship. It's clear that Paul illustrates his point by using examples common to the Corinthian church; and he's point is clear--without love your religious practice is nothing special.

Then in verses 4-7 Paul says what love IS. Love is patient, kind, not arrogant... Wednesday afternoon and evening I was vividly reminded of what love IS. Bonnie and David's grandson, Bryan, was taken to Loma Linda's emergency room, and I went there to be with Bryan and his mother. I've been told that ER's are not at all like the TV show, but Loma Linda's waiting room looked that way to me. I later learned that it is the only trauma facility for four counties, and while I was there four ambulances arrived with what the ER staff called GSW. I soon figured out this meant gun shot wounds. The ER was overflowing with people of all ages, and some including Bryan and his mom, were outside as they waited for their turn.

I always consider it to be a sacrament, a deep privilege, to be with families at times like this. There was no other place I wanted to be, but to be with Bridget and Bryan to offer what little help I had to give. At least having another person meant that Bridget could go to the car for a sandwich and go to the ladies' room. They had arrived a little before 3 p.m., I came about 4 p.m., and it was after 9 p.m. that Bryan's name was called. At least my presence meant that Bridget and Bryan could go to the van and rest while I stayed to hear his name called and not lose their place in line.

Usually I always have some work stuck in my bag in case there is just such waiting, but in my haste, I'd brought nothing to work on, so I assumed the Spirit was calling me to look and learn, listen and hear, and that's what I tried to do. One sees a lot of what love IS in an ER. There are anxious parents wearied by lack of sleep, worried about their child, mustering up all their patience to wait, and wait, and wait. An old man sits dozing off in his wheelchair with his wife beside him. A woman whose brother is dy-

ing of cancer pleads at the desk, her anger quickly turns to tears of desperation. In the mix of illness, a woman comes in labor, the dying is met with new life. I'm sure that there must have been many who were not in trauma but had no where else to go for treatment because they had no health insurance. But I couldn't tell who those people were. All who waited had the same worried look about their loved one or the same expression of pain or illness. I thought to myself, how could a receptionist possibly say to someone, "you can't be seen because you have no money or insurance." Could I do that? Could you do that? When does a life become equated with ones economic status?

Love IS giving your child a breathing treatment in the ER waiting room because all they can offer you for hours is a can of oxygen. Love IS a dad staying home with the three year old offering advice and wisdom to a worried mom. Love IS seen in the joy of finally getting a room, seeing a doctor, and preparing to sleep with your child in a room no larger than 5 x 9 ft. Love IS pouring out your whole self for the welfare of a child you may not see reach adulthood. Love puts all else in perspective. And I believe that perspective was what Paul was trying to get the Corinthians to understand.

Of course, this passage, often called the "love chapter" is a favorite for weddings; yet I wonder if the couple has a clue what the implications of Paul's words are to be for them. Do they think that love IS: accepting that all ones expectations for life may not come true, that love means enduring disappointments like illness, infertility, financial hardship, that love IS supporting each other while raising teenagers, struggling with a difficult job or no job at all, or finding your lover changed by the trauma of war either physically or emotionally, that love IS pouring out ones heart and soul for the well being of the other not knowing the end of the story. If couples really thought hard about this "love chapter" would they still want it read at their wedding?

Paul gave the church at Corinth some "tough love." He told them that everything about their church that they took pride in was worth nothing unless it was done out of love. Motivation meant everything.

In a few minutes we will engage in our Annual Meeting. We have a document that highlights some of what's happened in the year 2006. This meeting and this document will help us reflect on us as church--what we did and why we did it. It doesn't tell the whole story; but it tells part of our story. The touchstone for us as we review the past year and look forward to our future ministry is this: Did we do what we did out of the kind of love shown to us through the Christ? Is our love "living love" that responds to the NOW as well as anticipates and plans for the future? I'm sure we weren't perfect in our loving last year; and in the ways we failed, we believe God's grace is sufficient.

I'd like to offer this quote from Reinhold Niebuhr, a great theologian of our United Church. He says:

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime, therefore, we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; Therefore, we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; Therefore, we are saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

**And to Niebuhr's words, let me add: God is in our past forgiving us.
God is in our present loving us. God is in our future calling us.
Thanks be to God!**