

Practicing Love

A Sermon for Morning Worship, Blessing of the Backpacks Sunday

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

August 27, 2017

Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

What is love anyway? I can say I love my husband and I love a beautiful sunrise at Misquamicut, but are they really the same thing? I don't think so. One expresses the depth to which I cherish my life mate and the other describes my reaction to a beautiful moment in time. There are similarities, certainly, but they are clearly not the same thing. And yet "love" is used in both instances and you instantly knew what I meant. Such is the conundrum we must deal with as we try to talk about love and its connection to our lives and to our relationship with God. Sounds like a simple task, but is it? Not as easy as one might think, and therein lies our challenge for this morning.

We have spent this summer, you and I on Sunday mornings, talking about nuances of the language used in the Christian faith we profess. We've talked about Creation and its connections to God's expectations of us to care for this beautiful world He has entrusted to us. We've talked about proclaiming liberty, doing justice and loving mercy. We've talked about the role of doubt in faith lived and about faith itself. While I was away on vacation, Pastor Joyce talked with you about prayer. Then last week I spoke with you about joy and its role in the faith we profess and try to

live into reality. So now as summer comes to an end, it is time we turn our attention to the ultimate foundation of everything else we have been talking about – love. How is it that we as Christians put into practice the love Jesus came back to over and over again in his preaching, teaching and healing actions? This is our challenge, and it is not as simple as one might think.

That's the funny thing about love. It's so basic a concept that we think we know it. We think we know what Jesus is talking about whenever he talks about love as in "love your neighbor as you love yourself." Yeah, sure, we think. But what exactly *does* that mean in our lives each day? Then Old Testament doesn't talk about love in the same way as Jesus does. There are many references of the steadfast love of God for the people who turn away from God time and time again, yet still God loves them. Okay, that makes sense. That's comforting. But what of God's expectations of us when it comes to love? What is love supposed to mean to us as followers of Jesus? How is love part of our practice of the faith we profess?

For many of us, love is just part of the church, just part of the experience of being Christian, of being one who follows Jesus. We don't really think about it, some would say. We just do it. And that's true. If we understand love as the act of cherishing another person, of honoring and respecting another person, then what we do in the church all the time is most definitely loving. We put a

lot of emphasis in our church on caring for the other with donation drives like the backpacks and school supplies we just blessed this morning. We receive a Deacons Fund offering on every Communion Sunday in order to assist those who need our help. We respond with prayers and concrete actions when one of our own is hurting, afraid or ill. We gather together to celebrate the lives of those of our number who have died, supporting the loved ones left behind through everything we do. We support this church with our time, talent and treasure so that it continues its work as a beacon of hope – and love – in the community. So, as we think about all these things, it is no surprise that we believe we know what love is. We think we know how to love and why it matters. And that’s certainly true as far as it goes. But does it go far enough is the question we need always to ponder.

Such is Paul’s task in the text we read from his first letter to the church in Corinth this morning. He is asking the people of that ancient church to reexamine themselves in the light of a different understanding of love than they’re used to. And, he’s asking us to do the same every time we read these famous words he wrote. The 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians is widely known as the “love chapter.” It’s often read at weddings and funerals for obvious reasons. The couple entering into marriage are reminded of what love is supposed to be. The ones left behind when a loved one dies are encouraged to remember the love shared with that

person as a gift of God. And all of those are excellent reasons to read this incredible text. But, they are not the only ones. We miss so much wisdom and power in this text when we only consider it within such very specific contexts because it was never intended to read and applied so narrowly.

The first thing we need to remember is that this text is part of a larger letter Paul wrote to the Corinthian church because it was trying to figure out how to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus in a city that was known widely as the “sin city” of its day. In 53-54 CE when Paul was writing this letter, Corinth was an important city of the Roman Empire. It was the capital of the province of Achaia and was governed by a proconsul appointed by Rome. As such its government was very much Roman, and Romans were at the top of the social and political ladder. Corinth was a crossroads of the empire as a major, prosperous center for trade and communications. It had a great religious diversity also with a thriving Jewish community as well as cults worshipping Roman, Greek and Egyptian gods. It was known literally as a city where “anything goes.” One can easily imagine an ancient travel poster promising that “what happens in Corinth stays in Corinth.”

This is the context in which this ancient church in Corinth was established and attempting to put into practice the teachings of Jesus. Not surprisingly, this proved very difficult to do. Not only were there competing pagan religions to contend with, but

there were also competing groups claiming connection to the miraculous Jesus. These competing groups tried to stake out their claims of legitimacy by emphasizing the special gifts they possessed. Gifts like glossolalia or speaking in tongues, claims of miraculous healing, and teachers and prophets claiming to have THE one and only message of Jesus were tormenting the struggling group of folks trying to make a go of the ancient Corinthian church. That's why it is no accident that the chapter immediately before this one is Paul's detailed description of the gifts of the spirit and how to know they are legitimate and why that matters. This is what we lose when we only read Paul's love chapter in isolation from the rest of what he wrote.

Before Paul speaks about love to the Corinthians, he says "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone." He explains, "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." He reminds them, "just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." Then he describes what it means to be that one body: "the members have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together." Finally Paul reminds them of what it means to be a member of the body of Christ known as the church. "Now you are

the body of Christ and individually members of it.” Then he lists all the roles people hold within that body of Christ – teachers, preachers, healers, leaders – reminding them that each one has their own unique gift. It is all those gifts combined which make up the body of Christ, Paul says. Then he concludes with this invitation: “Strive for the greater gifts, [a]nd I will show you a still more excellent way.”

Love as Paul describes in the very next section of his letter IS that still more excellent way. If I am a phenomenal speaker that everyone envies, it doesn't matter, Paul says, if I don't have love in every word. In fact, me and my loveless beautiful words become a noisy gong or a clanging symbol – a loud noise to be avoided and shut off. If I am a person with a deep faith so strong that I can move mountains, but do not have love as my foundation in everything I do, me and my tremendous faith amount to exactly zero. If I give away everything I have, surrendering even my body to the service of God, but I do so without love as the reason for it, I gain nothing because it means nothing. Then, once Paul has told us what love isn't, he now tells us what love is. “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Incredible, beautiful, powerful words are these, Paul's definition of love. And impossible for any one person to live up to. Paul knew this. We know this. So, what do we do in the face of this beautiful, impossible standard of unfailing love? What do you do when faced with any difficult task that must be faced, must be tackled, must be completed no matter the circumstances? We do as Paul himself suggests before he even begins his description of love. We strive. We strive to the still more excellent way that is love. We strive to practice love, whenever and however we can. We reach for love instead of judgment when we have to deal with difficult, unpleasant people and situations. We guard against clanging symbol syndrome by speaking the language of love. We profess our love in what we say and what we do, as best as we are able, every day. When we give anything away – money, things, food, time – we do so in an attitude of love seeking nothing in return because we have figured out that love given freely returns magnified. In short, we are to practice love in everything we do in every part of our lives.

And that, dear friends, is not easy or simple. Love is not our default setting. Love is too often just not who we are. But, Paul reminds us, it is who we are meant to be. Love is to be the ground of everything in our lives – our relationships with each other and with God. And we must remember that we are called by Jesus to love the neighbor, the other, no matter who that is, as much as we

love ourselves. Jesus does not have any qualifiers about who is worthy of love, from him or from God or from you. Jesus, Paul reminds us, is the embodiment of love and Jesus expects us to strive to be the same, knowing we will always fall short because we are imperfect human beings. That's where grace enters the picture. Grace is our reality when we strive for love and fall short because grace means God loves us anyway. God loves us in spite of, because of, our imperfections. In return, all God asks is that we strive always to practice love.

Such is our challenge each day and it is a difficult one. Some days it feels downright impossible when we are bombarded with reminders of how unloving, unjust, unkind and just plain mean people can be. It's painful to practice love when people we thought we could trust betray the whole idea that God loves everyone just the same and then expect us to do the same. It's scary to practice love when hate becomes more and more bold in the world around us. And yet, dear friends, these scary and painful times are exactly when God most needs us to practice the love God gives us without hesitation or reservation. Can we do it? Paul thinks we can. Jesus is counting on us. That's enough for me. How about we give it a try together? Amen.