

Sermon 1-31-10 1Corinthians 13

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1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 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 do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Johann Arnold tells the story of his wife's parents, Hans and Margrit in his book, *Why Forgive?* Hans was pretty stubborn, which led to them being separated three different times. The first time, shortly after they were married, because Hans was a committed pacifist, and got jail time for his refusal to serve in the Swiss Army. The second time was in 1929, when Margrit wanted them to join the Broderhuff community in Germany. It took Hans a few months apart before coming around to the idea. The third time happened 30 years and eleven children later, once again the disagreement was over commitment to the community. Hans left his family and settled half way around the world in Buenos Aires, Argentina. When Johann married Hans and Margrit's daughter, Hans didn't even come to the wedding.

After eleven years of separation Johann and one of Hans's sons visited him in Argentina to see if they could find some way to bring about reconciliation. But all Hans could seem to do was tell story after story about the hurt and pain that he had endured, and he didn't appear the least bit interested in reconciling. Yet, on the last day, before they headed for home, he surprised them by telling them that he would soon make a trip to America in order to see the rest of the family.

When Hans came there were many discussions about his situation with the family, Hans knew that the only thing that stood in the way of his being reconciled with his wife and family was his stubborn refusal to forgive, but he just couldn't do it. In the

midst of one of those discussions that seemed to be going nowhere Johann's uncle Hans, who was in the house, dying of lung cancer, got out of bed and with much effort walked up to Hans and poked him in the chest saying, "The change has to come here." This from a man being kept alive by an oxygen tank, who struggled to find the strength just to speak.

Hans was totally disarmed, and he vowed on the spot that he would fly back to settle his affairs in Argentina, and then return to be with his wife and children. Now Hans and Margrit still had a lot to work through as they put their marriage back together, but they did eventually reach a place of deep joy and love for another 16 years until Margrit's death.

In our second lesson, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth coming apart at the seams because of their divisions. Last week we heard him reminding them of their unity by stating that they were many members of one body. This week he's more like uncle Hans tapping them all on the chest saying, "The change has to come here. You're called to live together in LOVE." Faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

In a letter to the church at Thessalonica, with many grieving over recent deaths, Paul also pulled out the trifecta of faith, hope and love, this time lifting up hope. That's what the Thessalonians needed, but the specific situation in Corinth calls for him to highlight love.

Love is what will bring the divisive faction together to live in unity. And the love that Paul describes is so much more than the sentimental variety we often find attached to the word in modern pop culture. The love that Paul points to isn't fickle. It doesn't come and go. It's eternal. For Paul it's the very essence of who we are. It's what makes up our true selves. Though our prayers might lift us into the ecstasy of heaven, though our theology, doctrine and ethics be sound, though we give away all our possession and have faith such as to move mountains, without love we are nothing.

The love Paul speaks of disintegrates our tendencies to fall in to self-doubt and self-denigration or self-aggrandizement and boasting. It is this deep abiding healing power of love that Eileen Campbell-Reed lifts up as the very thing that allows us to live in the tragic gap between what is and what shall be. She says, "Consider the church. Faith communities are places in which the tragic gap is evident at every turn. Old rivalries hover near the coffee pot at social hour, and ancient grudges wait just around the corner in the fellowship hall. Differences of opinion are gathered up in folded arms and raised eyebrows. Communities of faith are also communities of skepticism, doubt, and lingering hurt. Yet, we can see the possibilities of grace, forgiveness, and healing---the potential for faith, hope and love. Still we cannot escape the tragic gap between what is and what could be.

Rather than bemoan the tragic gap, Campbell-Reed says that we must reconceive it. “We must see it as a place of creativity, a place where maturity and wisdom grow, a place where possibility plays and a place where grace does its healing work. It is a space where community itself emerges, not just spontaneously, or simply...but in long faithful practice. It is a place where the loving Spirit of God dwells, and invites us to live.

Paul waxes eloquently about the maturity of God’s love come to full fruition within community: This love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. As his words hit our ears this day, it’s just like Uncle Hans tapping on our chests. We’re stirred to live our lives in the tragic gap between what is and what will be, trusting in the healing power of God’s love already at work turning our hearts into God’s own unifying love. It’s this love alone that creates the kind of community that can not only endure, but thrive in the midst of diversity and differences.

As I was out hiking on the grounds at the Abbey of Gethsemani this week, I came up from behind a statue that was standing in a small grove of trees in a large meadow. As I came around the side of it, I saw that it was a statue of Jesus, all white except for one spot right on his chest, where I could see his red heart on fire. He was holding his heart with both hands, with the index finger of his left hand pointing to it. I sat down for a moment to reflect on this statue, and it seemed to be telling me two things. First, it was a reminder of how much God loves me. Jesus’ heart is on fire with love for me. And secondly, it seemed also to be saying, “let the fire of love keep burning bright in your own heart as well.”

I don’t think that any of us can keep our fire burning without experiencing in some way God’s unconditional love for us. One of the things that I’ve come to appreciate about the enneagram is how it reveals to me my sin and compulsions in such a way as to realize that God sees me in my sin and brokenness, even more than I see myself, and yet still loves and cares for me. It gives me a glimpse of my fragility and sin in such a way that I can befriend my shadow side as I discover how my gifts are intimately woven together with my flaws. God’s healing, forgiving love isn’t threatening or violent, but rather a gentle, inviting, turning, like the opening of a flower bud, or the stretching of a butterfly’s wings for its first flight.

One of the best ways to experience God’s love for us individually comes through our being in community with one another. When we can share our joys and struggles, when we can be in a place where we’re accepted for who we are with no need to hide our flaws or accentuate our gifts, when we can share our hopes, dreams, doubts and fears within a group that won’t try to fix us or convert us to their right way of thinking, then we just might begin to get a taste of God’s love for us.

To be in community that cares for one another, encourages one another, prays for one another, that studies the Word together and serves together, just might be the very thing brings love to life in congregations from Corinth to Kokomo. Faith, hope,

and love abide, these three, and in the divisive climate of our world these days, I don't know about you, but I'm with Paul about which of the three is the greatest.