

Sermon: January 31, 2010

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Ps. 71:1-6; I Cor. 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Title: Love: The Essential Ingredient

Call to Worship from: Psalm 71

In You, O Lord, I put my trust

Let me never be put to shame.

Deliver me in Your righteousness

And cause me to escape

Incline Your ear to me, and save me.

Be my strong habitation,

To which I may resort continually;

You have given the commandment to save me;

For You are my rock and my fortress.

O God, You have taught me from my youth;

And to this day I declare Your wondrous works.

Now also when I am old and gray-headed

O God, do not forsake me,

Until I declare Your strength to this generation,

Your power to everyone who is to come.

Hymns: #376 Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

#335 Though I May Speak

#418 God, Bless Your Church with Strength

Prayer of Confession:

In Love you created us, O God, and it was your Love that came down in the person of Christ to redeem us. We are, above all, people of Love. And yet, we often project anything but a loving spirit. We look for the worst in others and we are quick to judge and condemn. When we are attacked or offended, we lash back. Our response is to find fault and to point fingers, and Love is not a part of our response. Forgive our unloving spirits and teach us over and over again that when we truly love our neighbor, even the neighbor who is radically different from us, we are fulfilling Christ's call to Love.

Amen.

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OK! Here's the thing. Paul has just laid out for the believers in Corinth how we are all part of the body of Christ. Some of us are feet and some are hands and some are knees and some are ears. It takes all of us to make up Christ's body in the world. Then again, Paul reminds those early believers that there are a lot of different skill sets: apostles, prophets, miracle workers, healers, administrators, language skills. And he ends this discussion with a very interesting statement. "And I will show you a more excellent way."

So, Chapter 13 is this "more excellent way"!

And it is all about Love. I don't care if you are a foot or an arm. I don't care if you are the heart or the liver. I don't care if you can speak in foreign languages or make prophetic statements. I don't care if you can heal the sick or feed the poor. If you don't exercise your God given talent within the spirit of Love, you are just like sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal.

I suspect we have all seen these info-commercials on TV about all kinds of products. There are even whole channels devoted to them.... I caught one the other day that was offering folks a simple way to lose the tummy fat that had built up around their waists. It was so simple. Just purchase this simple exercise machine, follow the directions for a month and you will see the pounds fade away. I was almost tempted to call the number on the screen, especially when they added a second machine that would build up my biceps and triceps and make me look like a teenager again. It was plain to see that these folks believed that they had a "more excellent way" to a slim figure and toned body.

Paul wants the Corinthian Christians to understand that he had a "more excellent way" to becoming true disciples of Christ. And it had nothing to do with purchasing something.

I get a little upset when I hear that some well known Christian Preacher has written a book that will guarantee "new life" to an individual or to a church. I'm sorry, I just get a little skeptical. The only thing that is guaranteed is that the author will collect a big fat royalty check from his publisher. In some cases he even owns the publishing house.

Paul doesn't make any guarantees. He simply states that there is a more excellent way of following The Master.... Of using our talents and skills in behalf of Jesus Christ. And that is to always add the ingredient of Love into everything we do.

I love to cook! There was a time when I could cook a four course meal over the open fire including a turkey on a spit, hot bread in the reflector oven, rice and vegetables steamed and pineapple upside down cake done in a dutch oven. And then serve it to Elaine on a hand made wooden table out in the woods over in Floyd County. I love to do oatmeal for breakfast. I know the receipt perfectly. And one thing that you cannot leave out is that pinch of salt you put in the water as it begins to boil. Oatmeal without the salt is like Pizza without cheese sauce. Or a baked potato without sour cream. Salt is that ingredient that you can do without, but when it is there the taste is so much more enjoyable.

Think about what it would be like to build a church without the key ingredient of Love.

I don't know about you, but I have had the experience of being in a Church were it was pretty evident that there were factions and that the members of those factions had very little love for the other factions. Can you imagine trying to invite outsiders into this kind of loveless fellowship. Well, it really wouldn't be a fellowship. It would, perhaps, qualify as an association: a loveless association. And that, my friends is not what Christ envisioned for his Church.

Paul had gotten wind of the tension that was beginning to develop within the Church in Corinth. Some were claiming that their spiritual gift was more important than someone else's. To nip it in the bud, he admonishes them to let Love be the key ingredient in their interaction with each other and with outsiders.

Agnes Junkin Peery tells the story of John G. Paton the first missionary to go to the islands called The New Hebrides. He was the very first person to tell the people there about Jesus who came to earth to show God's love and to save people from their sins.

When he reached the islands, he build himself a little house. In it he put the things he brought from his home: A bed, a table, a chair, a lamp, some pots and pans, some books and papers, all the things he needed to help himself

live and do God's work. He liked the things he had brought with him, because they made him comfortable and they reminded him of home.

After he was settled, he began preaching out under the trees, telling people about the love of God. He preached day after day, Sunday after Sunday, but no one seemed to believe what he told them about God.

One day he preached about loving one another, even those who are unkind to us. Among the words he read from the Bible were the words of Jesus, "give ... and do not refuse him who borrows of you."

The next day a strange thing happened:

A man came to John Paton's hut and asked to borrow his frying pan and his boiling pot.

Although Paton used them every day, he gave them to the man.

A woman came and asked him for his chair.

"Of course you may have it," he said and the lady carried out his chair.

A young boy came and asked him for his lamp and paper and pencils.

"He must want to learn how to write," Mr. Paton thought, as he gave these things to the boy.

A grandfather came complaining about his rheumatism and asked Mr. Paton for his nice comfortable bed.

The old man's grandson helped carry the bed away.

During the week the borrowing continued until poor Mr. Paton had nothing in his hut, and he had to read by firelight the Bible no one cared to borrow.

Sunday morning he got up as usual to go out to preach. When he stepped through the door of his hut he encountered an amazing sight. His Bed, his table, his chair, his lamp, his pots and pans, everything anyone had borrowed was standing in a big pile in his front yard. And the natives were all standing around laughing at his surprise!

As he stepped off his porch they rushed up to him, patted him on the back and gave him big hugs. "We really did not want your things," they said. "But we did not believe you meant what you said about giving to people in

need, giving to people who would borrow from you.. Now we know that you not only read the words from your Book, but that you do the words also. We want to be a part of the family of your God.”

And so a church was started on the islands of the New Hebrides, a church where people tried to live the words of God’s love they heard read.

Now, the 13th chapter of I Corinthians is one of those passages that really does not need detailed explanation. Other preachers have spent endless hours breaking out the parts and going into detail on each aspect of Love. But we don’t need that, do we? God gave us brains and we know how to use them when reading The Word. A better use of our time might be to explore some situations where Chapter 13 might be applied.

All of have neighbors, the kind who live in homes adjacent to ours. What do you do when a new family moves in beside you and calls in the city inspectors to complain that your boundary fence does not meet the code. The code says no fence higher than 6 ft. And your fence is 6ft 6inches. And the inspector orders you to remove your fence, and just as soon as you have removed your privacy fence, the new neighbor puts up one of her own. How do you love a neighbor who makes no effort to get to know you and communicate with you?

I believe School Teachers have more than their fair share of opportunities to demonstrate the kind of love that Paul extols. How do you deal with parents who will not admit that their child has a behavior problem. Every time you attempt to have a parent/teacher conference the parents become irrational and often become abusive toward the teacher or the school system. Anything but facing reality about their child. I know Love bears all things, but does that include an abusive parent?

Everyone has relatives, I hope. And relations between relative can become fragile from time to time. How do you demonstrate the Love that is not rude when an aunt or uncle does everything in their power to belittle you and make you feel small. Or how about a sibling who is constantly sucking your parents finances because they cannot or will not support themselves. Is there a loving way to let your sibling know that they need to stand on their own two feet and quit milking your parents for money? Speaking truth is so very difficult in family situations because inevitably the family relationships are fragile and can be so easily exploited.

It always breaks my heart when I hear that a couple is seeking divorce. Some of the best folks I know have ended up estranged to such a degree that the only viable solution seems to be divorce. And of course, it hurts even more when children are involved, especially younger children. All you can say is that “Divorce Happens.” But it seems to me that a follower of Christ will use that divorce as an opportunity to bring the light of Christ’s love to bear on the severed relationship. In the future rearing of children. In the division of goods and wealth. In the future communication pattern that develop between the families. Here is a place to exercise the aspect of Love that is not puffed up nor rejoices in iniquity. A relationship between husband and wife can be severed without vilifying each other to such a degree that no relationship exists... especially for children. What a challenge.

The work place is a tough venue to demonstrate the Love that suffers long. How often do you have to put up with a supervisor who puts you down and talks junk to you? We will put up with a lot just to keep the job. And in this economy, who in their right mind will file a complaint against a supervisor if they thought that they could lose their job. It happens all the time. How do you exercise your Love in a situation where the person giving you a hard time doesn’t really care for anyone but themselves and their position.

Now, these are but a few of the situations where the Love of Christ is challenged. And there are no pat answers. The best we can say is that because we are members of Christ’s Body, we have to give Love a chance. How can we know if Love is the answer unless we put it to work. And that is the challenge. Oh, one more example....

How can you love those who would actually plot to destroy you? This is more a political/social issue in this day than it ever has been. How can we face those who choose the radical Islam position and say to them, “In the name of Jesus Christ, we love you.”? This is probably the most pressing challenge of our day. Can we co-exist on this planet with a group of people who not only call us infidels, but believe that their God is pleased when they eliminate us. How is the Love of Christ applicable here? I have a thought. I look at the men and women who we have sent into Iraq and Afghanistan and we see the elite of this nation. And we are asking them to be two things at the same time. We ask them to be warriors who are prepared to defeat a hostile and vengeful force. And we ask them to be agents of peace, bringing

to these very same people a new way of life and helping them to build an infrastructure that will stand them in good stead when the fighting is over and we are gone. And the question rings in my ears. How can they be both? This is perhaps the most difficult challenge we have laid upon our military. And we who stay at home need to understand the tension that they are experiencing. One moment the warrior and the next moment the builder of hospitals and schools. And somewhere in the mix there will be thousands of opportunities for our men and women to bring the Love of Christ to bear.

Friends, as always, I don't ask you to agree with me. I simply ask you to struggle with the ideas and in your own lives to allow the precepts of Chapter 13 to become more real in your relationships, in your families, at school, at work, in your social relationships and in your understanding of our nation as One Nation Under God.

And most of all I implore you to follow the words of Paul who began the very next chapter with these words: Pursue Love....

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