

“LOVE NEVER ENDS”

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Sunday, December 30, 2012

First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ
Burlington, Vermont

I Corinthians 13: 1-13, I John 4:7-12

I.) Several weeks ago when I was asked to preach on this Sunday, there was some question as to whether this Sunday would actually happen, in light of the Myan prediction of the “end of the age”. I thought that might have something to do with my being asked to preach. But then I found myself thinking, “Wow, if the end really were coming, and if this were the last sermon that I would ever preach, what would I want it to be?” And without hesitation I knew that I would preach about LOVE, and I would choose I Corinthians 13 as my text. Although not for a minute do I think that the world is about to come to an end, I am less certain about when my world might come to an end. After all it is true that I am an old man, and besides, how often do Adrienne and Peter both leave town on the same Sunday? So I decided that I should seize the moment and preach this sermon on this text.

The reason that I find this subject so compelling is simply that I believe that it goes to the very heart of our religious life. I know that some would disagree. Many Christians see personal salvation as the central purpose of our faith. Others think seeking after truth is central, and they produce doctrines and creeds to express their conclusions. Some emphasize the need to obey God’s laws, if we could only agree just what they are. Others argue that it matters not so much what we do, but what we believe, and how we articulate that belief.

As a result, the history of Christianity is not a pretty thing. It is filled with conflict over these very issues, leading to Crusades, Inquisitions, Schisms, cruelty and violence. For the first 300 years the church argued about how we should understand Jesus: human, divine or both at the same time. The losers of those debates were harshly treated and driven out of the church, or even put to death as heretics. Europe was ravaged by the “30 Years War” following the theological turmoil surrounding the Protestant Reformation. Then the Roman Catholics and the Protestants found common ground in severely persecuting the Anabaptist for daring to suggest that baptism should be by immersion. Even today in some places church factions are set against each other over the roll of women and the acceptance of gays and lesbians into the church.

But our text argues that more important than what we do, obeying Laws, or what we believe, getting our doctrine straight, is what we are. We are to be loving people, people who love both God and neighbor, people who are motivated, make our decisions and live our lives from a posture of love.

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, (Paul said) but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. 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 have not love, then I am nothing. If I give away all that I have and deliver my body to be burned, but have not love then I gain nothing.”

There was dissension and divisions in the congregation. Some considered themselves to be followers of Apollos, some of Peter, and some of Paul. There was immorality, in that a man was found to be living with his father’s wife. Some thought that they were more important than others because of their positions in the church. Some of the conflicts that arose among the members had even led to lawsuits in the secular courts. There were disputes over the issue of eating meat that had been sacrificed to Pagan Gods, and the issue of “speaking in tongues” threatened to split the church. There was doctrinal confusion over the meaning of the “resurrection of the body” as well as the manner in which communion should be taken. The letter ends with Paul receiving an offering to take back to the

poor Christians in Jerusalem. Which I believe proves beyond a doubt that the letter addresses an authentic local church experience.

Chapter after chapter Paul deals patiently with each of these very real problems. Then, very abruptly, as though he had run out of patience, Paul inserts the “Love Passage”. It is as though he grew weary of trying to explain what to do with each of these individual issues, and said effectively, “If we simply learn to truly love each other then all of these problems will go away. Everything will take care of itself”. Love of God and love of each other, are the principles for governing our lives and the life of the church. Apply them to all of life and these kinds of conflicts simply will not arise.

III.) And Paul is not an outlier in his declaration of the “Primacy of Love”, but stands squarely in the main stream of Biblical theology. In our first scripture lesson, we find John proclaiming that, “God is LOVE”, and that anyone who does not love does not know God. That is pretty simple and straight forward. Furthermore, “ If anyone says that he loves God but hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” So this is the commandment, that he who loves God should love his brother also.

And, of course, both John and Paul are simply expanding on the fundamental message of Jesus. Jesus said that the love of God and of neighbor is the sum of all of the LAW and the PROPHETS. He also made clear that we must even love those whom we see as our enemies. He said that the distinguishing characteristic of the church would be the quality of LOVE that existed there. It is not the sign of the cross, not the steeple on the building, not the presence of the sacraments, but “They will know you are my followers by the love that you have for one other.”

In the LOVE PASSAGE Paul insists that there is no value, no virtue, no reward in anything that we might do, no matter how high sounding and noble it might seem, unless it is done in love. Speaking in strange tongues may be an exhilarating, charismatic experience, but if it leads only to pride and a sense of self-importance, it is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. Having prophetic powers, and great knowledge and understanding, are wonderful gifts, but if they only serve to feed your sense of pride and superiority, rather than being used for the edification of the whole community, they are not of much value.

Even the greatest acts of charity and martyrdom, are of no importance if they are not motivated by love, and offered in a spirit of love.

IV.) From the words of Paul, John and of Jesus, it is clear that for Christians, LOVE is the goal of it all.

LOVE is greater even than FAITH, for if God is love, then faith is only the means to the end, which is LOVE. Furthermore, if God is LOVE then faith without LOVE, is a form of idolatry. And faith without love is always unlovely and can be dangerous. Many of the most violent and cruel acts in human history can be laid to a misguided faith, in the absence of love. It is my conviction (and you can write this down) that “Faith without love inevitably becomes demonic.”

And Paul surely believed that LOVE is more important than TRUTH. For he freely confessed that our prophecy and knowledge and understanding are all partial and imperfect. And it will always be so in this life, like seeing through a mirror dimly.

So, in humility let us confess that our doctrines and creeds and knowledge are all partial and imperfect. Let us not take ourselves and our opinions too seriously. Let us not be contentious toward

other persons or denominations or even other religions, but rather let us strive to excel in LOVE. For LOVE alone is perfect, and when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.

Finally, Paul claims that LOVE is greater than HOPE. And here on the threshold of a new year, let it be said that our Hope rests securely upon the conviction that the nature of God is to love. And as Paul wrote to the church at Rome, “There is nothing in this world or the next that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” That is why we dare to have hope for the future, and Love is greater than hope because without love what would be the basis of our hope?

V.) These words of Paul and of John and of Jesus about Love are confirmed in the Sacred Stories of our faith. When God saw his people bent low under the yoke of slavery in Egypt, compassion for their suffering compelled God to call Moses and send him to Pharaoh and demand “Let my people go.” What followed stands as the greatest and most influential liberation story in all of Western civilization. And has been an inspiration to oppressed people for over 4,000 years.

When God heard the cries of His people in bondage as exiles by the waters of Babylon, the Prophet Isaiah came forth and proclaimed “Thus saith the Lord. Fear not, for I am with you. I have called you by name. You are mine. You are precious in my sight, and I love you.” Then God led them through the wilderness, back to their home in Jerusalem.

Make no mistake, these sacred stories are Love Stories.

But centuries pass and once again God’s people are oppressed, this time as conquered people under the boot of the occupying armies of Rome. Then it is that the Apostle declared, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whosoever believed in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” And God’s Son came into the world in a most unlikely way. As a baby boy, born in a cattle stall far from home, to a young, unmarried girl, betrothed to a poor carpenter. And this Prince, this Son of God, grew into a man and declared that he did not come to be served, but to serve. He came not to judge but to save. He said that he came that we may have life and have it abundantly. And though you would think that before Him every knee would bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. We actually find him kneeling, washing the feet of his disciples.

What kind of God is this? What kind of stories are these? Can they possibly be true? Frederick Buechner says that they must be true, because they are so preposterous that no one could ever have made them up. Besides, he says, they are simply too good not to be true. No doubt these stories are part remembered history, but also part metaphor, part myth and part statements of faith. But in any case they are the stories that inform our understanding of what God is like and what we should be like. They shape our values and define our faith. And I would suggest that they confirm that God is a God of love, and that the central goal of our lives should be to become loving people.

Finally, the Apostle declares that LOVE alone is eternal. LOVE alone never ends. Everything else is partial and imperfect, and when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.

Thornton Wilder, author of the well-known play, “Our Town”, said “There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is LOVE, the only survival, the only meaning”. It is somehow comforting to think that love will never end- that when the history of our race is recorded in eternity, the love that we have known and shared will be remembered. For when we reflect upon our lives, isn’t it true that the things that are truly important and memorable have to do with the love that we have known?

It is comforting to know that no matter what the future might bring, or where our individual journeys might take us, the love that we have known and shared along the way, and indeed the love we share this very day, will not pass away. It alone will survive the refiner's fire and live eternally.
AMEN.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious and loving God incline thine ear and hear the prayers of your people. Hear first our prayers of praise for the wonderful works of your hands. For you created all that is and saw that it was good. Then you created our race in your own image, and saw that it was very good.

We give thanks for the gift of this beautiful and bountiful earth, as well as for the great blessing that it is simply to live as your people in your world. And we rejoice in the goodness and love that we share with our brothers and sisters. Yet we confess that we have not always been good stewards of your creation, and too often we have failed to respond to the needs of your people. Forgive us for when we have fallen short and empower us to do better in the days ahead.

For we know that our world is filled with suffering and pain and grief, and that violence has become ingrained in our national character. Hear our prayers this day on behalf of the victims of this violence, and all who grieve over them. May your Holy Spirit descend upon us, and transform us: still the anger in our hearts, and replace our self-interest with a concern for others. Let there be forgiveness and reconciliation in place of hatred and vengeance, overcome our prejudices and teach us to love and appreciate those who are different from us, even those who may disagree with us. Beginning with our leaders in Washington, may we all become more concerned with the general welfare and less with our own welfare.

Now hear our prayers of intercession on behalf of the poor, the sick, the homeless, those who find themselves in harms way and those who find no cause for hope. In this season of Christmas, may the peace and joy that we experience in this place, among this congregation spread forth into our community and beyond, so that in the year ahead, all of God's people might find themselves in a better place, with more peace, hope, love and joy in their lives.

We pray all things in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray, saying "Our Father, who art in heaven..."