

Text: 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13  
Title: The Greatest of These Is Love

Date: January 31, 2010

So last week we were talking about the notion that the basis of our worship is the experience of Good News. Ezra told his people that the time of their repentance was over. God had not only brought them safely home from Babylon- but God gave them a clean slate, a new beginning as well. So Celebrate! Have a party! And so in the 9 & 11am services I tossed my idea for a children's sermon and shot a screaming monkey toy across the sanctuary. There is just something about a toy that connects us to our inner child and the joyous sense of abandon that kids have. Jesus opened his sermon in Nazareth by reminding his people that Isaiah promised that the Good News would be proclaimed to the poor, the blind receive their sight and that the oppressed would be set free. Clean slate for everyone! And it is this sense of new beginning, a new start that naturally leads our hearts to gratitude and thanksgiving.

So far so good- but there is a problem. Do you see it? Gratitude as a basis of relationship only goes so far. It doesn't matter if is relationship between God or people- sooner or later gratitude morphs into resentment. I know it doesn't make sense, but it is often the way things work out. You see, deep in our nature is the desire to be equal. There is nothing that drives us up the wall faster than the notion that someone else has an unfair advantage. From kids calling each other "cheater!" (Them's fighting words!) to modern day politics- we hate the notion that some people think they are better than us. It's just the way things are. So, we take turns picking up the check in restaurants, because no one wants to feel one down in the friendship. You know the old saying, "the problem with rescuing a damsel in distress is that you are stuck with a distressed damsel?" How many times have we seen this in romantic relationships: the knight in shining armor rescues the damsel in distress and NEVER allows her to forget it? Sooner or later she is going to resent being stuck in that box. Pretty soon she's saying, "hey look pal, whoever said I needed rescuing!?!". No one wants to stay one down in a relationship. We want to be equals- that's why we describe marriage in terms of a partnership.

But how can one be equal to God? God is ALWAYS going to be at least one up on us. It's hard to compete with Creator Of The Universe! We want to pull our own weight, show God that while, yes, we do need forgiveness, that we are really not all that bad. We prove it to ourselves by living up to rules, or at least acting in such a way that we don't want to embarrass God. I knew a Baptist pastor. We lived in a state where you had to go to a special store to buy beer. So he would have his wife drop him off in front of the store. While she drove around the block, over and over- he would dash in, buy the 6 pack and then jump into the car as it came around. All so his people wouldn't think that he was unholy or a slobbering drunk or something like that. That whole thought process- doing something so that you maintained the appearance of being holy never made any sense to me. True story- I spent an ill considered semester in a fundamentalist Bible college. At new student orientation they announced that we would be expelled if we were found hanging out in bars. My first thought was that the only way anyone was going to catch me in a bar was if they were hanging out in the bar themselves! I was willing to put my student status against their employed status any day of the week. What an asinine policy! But this is what comes from us trying to get out of a one down relationship to God.

So how do we get off this roller coaster- our desire to be equal getting in the way of celebrating God's grace? God gave us the answer when he put our deepest longing into our hearts: Love. Our deepest longing is to know and be known- and to be cherished for who we really are on the inside. This longing is at the core of our favorite stories. Will the Prince see past Cinderella's rags? Will Roxanne get past Cyrano's nose? Will Lois Lane see past Clark Kent's mild manner? I can't think of ANY romantic comedy that doesn't have this longing to be known and cherished at its core. It even serves as a theme in Avatar. (Pocahontas in Space!)

For Love necessarily implies mutual revelation, mutual discovery, mutual relationship. Part of the overwhelming surprise of the Gospel is that we can know God, as God chooses to love us, not only are we known and cherished, we experience becoming closer with God! This is what Paul is getting at.

Normally we hear this passage at weddings- as read it through those eyes. Let's take another look. Paul is writing to the Corinthians, trying to head them off at the pass.

They have developed some really weird ideas- that there were those who were super spiritual- and as a result they were above everybody else. For most of the book, Paul has been using himself as an example. You want to grow in the faith? Do as I do. Now he changes course- he still uses himself as an example, but this time of what not to do.

They already know that Paul can speak in the tongues of mortals and angels- public speaking was not one of his challenges! They already know that Jesus appeared to Paul- commissioning him as a prophet to the gentiles. Paul has got faith in spades, has dedicated his life to preaching the Gospel and not wealth. And while Paul is not yet imprisoned in Rome, they already know that even this would not faze him. All of these are good things in themselves- but Paul say that if I don't have love- they are worse than worthless! Anything holy without love becomes anything but.

I love the cadence: Love is Patient, Love is Kind, Love is not envious.... Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. That's another reason we love this passage at wedding- it is just beautiful! Paul doesn't have to say this love comes from God- the love that can do all of this has to come from above. And just to make sure that the Corinthians get this- he links Love with Prophecy- which everyone knows comes from God.

But Love is not a one way street the way that Prophecy is. Love is about mutuality. God does not only loves us, but in loving us gives us the ability to love God back- and in the process we become more like God! The closer I get to God, the more patient and kind I become. The closer I get to God, the less irritable or resentful I become. The closer I get to God, the more I am able to love others with the love that I have been given.

Finally Paul speaks to our deepest longing. Not only will we be able to love like God, but in experiencing love, in the giving and the sharing we will know God as completely as God knows us. The surprise of the Gospel is that God sees past the barriers we build, pass the masks we hide behind and through our ability to hide and run from Him. God knows us and we ARE cherished. There will be a day when we will fully know and cherish God. we will never be equal with God, but will in not be in a one down relationship either. Paul is describing as experience of mutuality – the closest thing we have is marriage. Another reason that 1 Corinthians 13 is so perfect for weddings.

Today is our annual meeting. We gather, not to vote for elders and deacons- we've done that already. We gather, not to vote on the Budget- Session as approved that already. In fact, we have no administrative tasks at all on our agenda. We gather to remind each other of what God is doing in our midst; how God gives of opportunities to know and be known, to love and be loved. And after all of that we are going to follow Ezra's advice and have a party- OK, a potluck. Paul ends this passage with *and now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love*. I can't improve on that.

Hymn # 335 Though I May Speak