

sermon-1/31/10 Newport Presbyterian Church
“A Love Bigger Than Weddings”
I Cor. 3:1-13

When you heard Paul’s beautiful poem to love couldn’t you almost hear wedding bells? Did you picture a smiling wedding couple standing before the pastor making huge promises, some of which they do not, and probably cannot fully appreciate at this stage in their relationship?

This passage is often read at weddings. I know I have done so countless times. It works. It speaks of a sacrificial love on a day when the love between two people is being celebrated. It puts love in a scriptural context, which is what we hope all married couples do with their love.

But, even though I will probably continue to read this passage at weddings, we need to recognize we are not fully doing justice to Paul’s poem. We are taking it out of context when we slap it on weddings. When we do that we miss some of the power of what Paul is doing here. We lose, as well, some of the challenge this scripture might bring to our church.

One commentator says the beauty of the poetry can hide the practical and forcefulness of these words written to a “conflicted congregation, caught up in a distorted spirituality, engaged in intense power struggles.” If we read the whole of Paul’s letters to the Church at Corinth, we would see this is one messed up church.

Scholars tell us those in Corinth who first read this letter in one of their gatherings, as was the custom with the churches Paul founded, would not have been pleased with the letter as a whole. They would particularly be incensed with this beautiful little poem.

Some of you will remember last Sunday’s text where Jesus preached his first “sermon” to his hometown in Nazareth. At first they liked what he said. But then he starts to meddle with their prejudices, their narrow conception of God, and they want to lynch him. Well, Paul’s letter, and particularly chapter 13, would have had the same affect on those in Corinth. It would feel like a slap in the face. Let me explain.

Jeffrey Jones, a Baptist pastor in Massachusetts, puts it this way. “Everything he (Paul) says love is not, they are; everything he says love is, they are not.” For example, all those qualities Paul mentions in the first three verses: speaking in tongues, prophetic powers, knowledge of mysteries, extraordinary faith, radical generosity, and even self-sacrifice, are all the things the Church in Corinth valued. In fact, they were pretty darn proud of how they were engaged in those activities and gifts of the Spirit.

But, their pride in what they were doing was getting in the way of their being a healthy community of faith. One commentator said, “Christians seem to have a special gift for cloaking self-interest with self-righteousness.” They loved their spiritual gifts because it made them look real good. And when some had the gift, but others didn’t, then the haves

could look down on the have-nots in a condescending way and feel even better about themselves.

Paul pokes a huge hole in their self-righteous balloon. What he says in those first three verses is rather shocking really. The spiritual gifts he talks about and the actions they lead to are quite wonderful. Who would not praise one who gave everything away to charity, or who had faith to move mountains or some other miracle? We all stand back in awe of someone who is faithful to the point of self-sacrifice and even death. They are all good things.

But, says Paul, if the basis for those gifts and actions is not love, the kind of self-giving love God exhibits, the love the Greek translates as *agape*, then all those gifts and noble actions mean nothing. If they are done to secretly give us esteem, to make us look good or better than our peers, they are worthless!

We can't help but ask ourselves here at Newport if any of this applies to us. What do we pride ourselves on that might get in the way of our loving? Our progressive theology? Our mission focus? Our inclusiveness?

Please don't get me wrong. I am not saying those things are wrong. I am quite pleased to be in a church that emphasizes a progressive theology where God is seen as bigger than Christianity, where all are welcome, where following Jesus is seen as better than merely believing in a bunch of theological tenets, and where mission support is critical to our identity.

We just need to be ever vigilant to make sure those strong points don't become unnecessarily divisive, or puff us up at another community's expense. We need to be clear of our motives. Are we expressing and sharing the love we have all been given in Christ?

Let's conclude with a little discussion on this notion of love. When Paul says, love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things," some have used that to do harm to others. I know some women in abusive marriages have been encouraged by their pastors to bear whatever the spouse was dishing out, to endure the abuse for love's sake. That is not what Paul meant. He is not promoting a blind love that does not call out others for their shabby behavior.

When Paul says "love never ends," some translations say, "love never fails." That second translation could be seen as saying if we just love enough, we will get good results. If we love the alcoholic enough, and stick with it, he/she will be healed. If we loved our children enough, they would never get into trouble. If we loved the enemy enough, they would cease to want to do us harm.

Again, that is not what Paul is getting at when he says love never ends. He is referring to God here. The essence of God is love. First John puts it more bluntly, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." (First John 4:16) God

never ends. The kind of love God embodies, the kind of love by which we center ourselves for all our actions in community, all our noble actions of charity and giving, that kind of love never ends, even in the next life.

That is why Paul can say the three greatest things are faith, hope, and love, but the greatest is love. Once we see God face to face, once this life ends and all is consummated, then we won't need faith and hope like we do now.

If our greatest hopes have been realized in God's Kingdom, hope becomes unnecessary. If faith in God's presence and grace is fully experienced, then faith ceases to be necessary. But love will always be present just as God is always present with us in this life and the next. The basis of any relationship, any community, is the love in which we live and move and have our being.

May we strive to be a community where the foundation of all our actions, all our sacrifices, all our gifts, is love. Amen