

## The Knowledge of Love

(prayer)

He was not a particularly nice man. Blunt, stubborn, belligerent, even frightening. Many folks have told me that they just don't like this man, they don't like particular things he said.... That is why I believe that only in God's infinite sense of humor and grace, is it the case that this scripture reading on love has come to us through the hand of Paul. Let us be clear, even those scholars of scripture who are not Christian, those who examine under the cold eye of historical text criticism, have more confidence that this letter was written by Paul than they have about any writer of the Gospels.

This chapter, this word of God, this bit of prose poetry, so beautifully written that even some who never step foot in a church choose to use it in a wedding ceremony. Excluding what will fit on a bumper sticker, I would suppose that 1 Corinthians Chapter 13, along with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm are the most known scriptures we have. It almost seems presumptuous to read this chapter and do anything other than say Amen, and stop. –But I won't do that.

This letter, by Paul, to the Corinthians, comes to us as a love letter. Now, if you read it from the beginning, it does not sound much like a love letter, it sounds... like Paul. Responding to reports of disorder in the congregation, of groups vying for power, of prostitution, gluttony, even, and this is hard to believe, of women praying without wearing veils --Paul lays into them for all of this. He exhorts them, he counsels them and it all leads up to this 13<sup>th</sup> chapter on love. The letter, written to a church, not to individuals, would have been read aloud to the gathered congregation.

Two weeks ago, James Ford preached here and the message was of solidarity. Last week, unfortunately the ice kept some of us away. But Phanta spoke eloquently on 1 Corinthian, Ch. 12, concerning the unity of the many members of the body of Christ. That reading directly precedes today's reading. For Paul, the unity of the body of Christ is his greatest theological concern. Unity being the "what," "Love is the "way". Unity is also the greatest failure of the reformation. The church is ever willing to divide over every theological or pseudo-theological question possible with anyone who disagrees with "us."

I use a Harper Collins NRSV Study Bible- it's the one recommended by our seminary, it has study notes, but I didn't like the first note on Chapter 13. It began, "Although there is nothing explicitly theological in this chapter...." If we use the standard definition of theology-the study of God-, I would call this chapter the most explicitly theological statements Paul ever wrote. Here, we get an intersection between the mystical Paul who speaks of the nature of God's love which never ends, and the pragmatic Paul who describes this active love as it works in the here and now for the unity of the church.

The theology of justification by faith, the theology of baptism, or the nature of Christ's presence in the communion, have all been used to divide the church and are nothing but a noisy gong if not founded in love. Of what use is the knowledge of the periodic table of elements, if we cannot care enough to provide clean water to people in Flint Michigan? Whether there are three, four, or twenty-eight dimensions to our universe, this knowledge is a noisy gong, if we cannot love God's creation enough to protect it for our children. Love is the foundation of any Christian knowledge. Hear Paul, Ch. 8: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Martin Luther King Day. As a child of the church, as a pastor and as a civil rights leader, Dr. King had a few things to say about the knowledge and the acting out of love, in fact, his short book of sermons was titled “the strength to love.” King reminded us that love is neither blind nor weak. Listen to King’s words from a message delivered in 1967 to the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference**.

“And I say to you, I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today. And I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. For I have seen too much hate. I've seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the South. I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South to want to hate [myself] because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities, and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love.”

King's words have passed beyond the legacy of struggles in the 60's to struggles we still face in this city today. His words have passed over the oceans and across faith traditions. Did you hear the Muslim woman, a Member of Parliament, in Great Britain: she said, "Donald Trump is evil and a demagogue, but I would not ban him from Britain, instead, I would invite him for a curry. " She continued, "It's Martin Luther King Day in America, I have decided to stick with love, hate is too great a burden to bear."

This is a lesson worth learning.

As a seminary student, I have learning goals for my work here as an intern. Perhaps one day I will actually understand something about Presbyterian Polity. But, Pastor John told me when I arrived, "Caldwell has always been blessed to have interns with the gifts that were needed at the time they came to Caldwell." I cannot speak to that, however, I believe God has placed every intern here because that intern needed to learn something from this church. And I believe I have been placed here to learn something about love. I have observed that love is kind- like the welcome one receives when first entering the doors of this church. Love rejoices in the truth, the truth of children who tell it like it is every

week up front. Love bears all things, like the silent work of maintenance and upkeep on the weight of old buildings.

Love believes all things like a bold and affirming mission statement. Love hopes all things as we offer up prayers and concerns and the people of Caldwell hope for each other and act on that hope. Love endures all things; like conflict. It cares enough to be angry, and is vulnerable enough to suffer. And love never ends-like the witnesses at memorial services I have participated in here. Love never ends for those who love and for those loved ones who now fully know because they are fully known. A picture has formed in my head that heaven could be compared to an endless passing of the peace here at Caldwell.

Soon, we will recite together the Nicene Creed. This most ancient creed was originally crafted in 325 ACE after Emperor Constantine made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. Like today, Christians from one place did not agree with Christians from another place in their theological interpretation of scripture. In fact, they were killing each other over meaning of words. Some would say the creed was written to squash dissent. I offer another perspective. It was written by the greatest minds of the church as an act of love. In the Orthodox Church this creed is still called 'the symbol of faith', literally "the bringing

together". It was written to bring peace and unity to the church. I would ask that we recite together this creed, not as a litmus test of a cognitive belief system, but as an act of love for the gift that binds this particular church with the universal historical church.

Can we love the church? This is the greatest theological issue for the universal church today. When we answer "yes," all those dreamy and ethereal ways I like to talk will be caught up in the concreteness of a Church budget that recognizes that the church does not exist for itself, but she exists to let justice roll down like waters into the neighborhoods and schools of this city.

Paul did not get the justice he deserved. With his Damascus road experience, Saul the persecutor of Christians was converted to Paul the follower of Christ, but God did not convert Paul's personality. And no one knew his own shortcomings any better than Paul himself. As he says in Romans "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

Which may explain how it is that Paul can write such beautiful words on love, because Paul never forgot God's justice, which is the freedom to love a former persecutor of the followers of Christ.

And so, Jesus looks down from the cross and says, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Forgive the Pharisees who thought they were upholding the purity of the faith. Forgive the power players who were protecting their turf. Forgive the followers of Jesus who did not stage a protest in civil disobedience. And so we exclaim each week, when we have not loved well enough, “Caldwell, in the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven.” Thus is the great mystery, and the great joy of the knowledge of God’s love.