

“Tough and Tender Love” GPPC 2-3-19
Jeremiah 1:4-10, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Many years ago, I had a pastor friend who conducted a lovely wedding in a church sanctuary. And after the wedding, the bride and groom and the congregation all went outside for the release of doves in celebration of this auspicious occasion. Everybody lined the sidewalk. The bride took a dove in her cupped hands and the groom took a dove in his cupped hands. Then the bride and groom released their doves simultaneously. One, two, three...and with gentle sweeping motion the couple opened their hands, releasing the beautiful creatures to soar with breathtaking grace into the sky.

The groom's dove went fluttering into the distance. And the people smiled and went, “Ah.” But the bride's dove just fell to the ground. And the people frowned and went, “Oh.”

Well the bride's dove was picked up and the release was attempted by the bride again. One, two, three...and the dove fell to the ground. The people frowned and went, “Oh.”

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So the groom stepped in. Obviously, this dove just needed some help flying. So the groom picked the dove up, reared back like he was throwing a football, and he tossed the dove as hard as he could. And my friend said it sailed into the distance before landing with thud. And the people went, “Oh!” And this is why I warn couples about using animals in weddings.

And it just goes to show you that weddings, like marriages, like the church, like life are beautiful and imperfect, always in need of some course correction and growth.

1 Corinthians 13, of course, is often used in weddings, and heaven knows I’ve preached a few wedding sermons from it. But originally Paul wrote this section of his letter not for starry-eyed couples. He wrote it for a Corinthian church he’d founded and loved, but also a church, that like all churches, was struggling.

The church in Corinth was grappling with a number of issues. I’ll mention a few. Some of the Christians had gotten the idea that they did not need to behave with any sexual responsibility. To use a technical term, they could just go “hawg wild.”

The Corinthian Christians also imagined they possessed some sort of knowledge that made them superior to other garden variety Christians. And on top of this, they believed they had spiritual gifts that made them better than other Christians. Especially they were proud of an unusual gift--the ability to speak in tongues.

So in chapter 12, Paul reminds the Corinthians that there are indeed varieties of gifts. They all come from God and all are important to the Body of Christ, just as all the parts of our bodies are important. The foot is not better than the hand. No gift is better than the others. We need all the parts, all the gifts.

And then in chapter 13, the chapter divided into three sections, Paul speaks about love as tough and tender at the same time. To begin, by love Paul does not mean romantic or sentimental feelings that come and go. What he means by love is a commitment to thinking, speaking, and acting for the best interests of others, especially when it's difficult. And Paul puts all the gifts, indeed all of life, within the context of love.

He says, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have

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prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

We can have all sorts of impressive gifts, eloquent and faithful speech, the ability to know and express God’s will, and even to practice sacrificial generosity, but without love it’s just noise. It’s just nothing.

Have you seen that in your life or in the lives of others? We can have an amazing array of impressive gifts, but if they’re not utilized and motivated by love, then they’re nothing.

A spiritual writer says, “In the 1983 movie *Choices of the Heart*, Melissa Gilbert plays a woman who drives her Irish boyfriend crazy by hugging, kissing, and lounging on him while he tries to study. When he protests, she says she just wants to give of herself.

“‘Well,’ he replies, ‘you’ve got a selfish way of giving.’” (Kristen Johnson Ingram in *Weavings*, Sept/Oct. 2005, 26.)

Paul’s tough love challenge is for us to look not just at which gifts we’ve received and what we do with them but at what *motivates* us.

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What drives us? Is it a selfish way of giving or is it love for God and other people that prompts us? It makes all the difference.

Then, in the second section of the chapter, Paul begins to describe love's characteristics. "Love is patient," he says. A professor said patience here means allowing another person to be other, to be different from us. So in the church we can have vigorous dialogue and agree on the essentials of our faith. But we can still have plenty of room for disagreement about all sorts of other issues, including issues related to social justice. In fact, the word here for patient also means "to remain tranquil while waiting...to bear up under provocation without complaint [to be] forbearing." An important part of being a Christian means being patient with other people in the church (and in the world for that matter). It means forbearing, putting up with each other, especially when we disagree about issues that seem important. It's not easy, but it's part of being loving.

And love is also kind. In other words, love is merciful. Love in the church means being able to accept that I'm not perfect and you're not perfect, and that's perfectly okay.

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Presbyterian writer Anne Lamott, quoting an anonymous source, says, “Love is hard. Love is...seeing the darkness in another person and defying the impulse to jump ship.” (Anne Lamott, *Hallelujah Anyway*, 79.)

Love is kind and merciful.

Then Paul says, “Love is not envious, or boastful or arrogant or rude.” So love is not jealous. To love is not to be puffed up, a braggart, a windbag (the word literally means to “blow up” or “inflate” like a pair of bellows).

You may remember Bishop Michael Curry’s magnificent wedding sermon for Prince Harry and Megan Markle, now the Duchess of Sussex. You might recall the sermon’s refrain. “When love is the way... When love is the way...” Paul is saying, “When love is the way, we let go of jealousy, because we have enough.” “When love is the way, we don’t brag, or become arrogant, or rude, because we know we’re merely human beings. God is the One who is great. We remember that when love is the way...”

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Then Paul also says “Love does not insist on its own way; it’s not irritable or resentful; it doesn’t rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.”

Now Paul is not saying that love is a pushover and a wimp. “Well, I don’t care. It doesn’t matter.” Paul is not saying that. He’s saying that when we love we don’t use others to seek our advantage.

And Paul is *not* saying we are never angry, but when we love we are not grouches “easily angered.” And when we love we keep “no record of wrongs.” We truly forgive, just as God forgives us.

And when we love, we do not rejoice in wrongdoing, (one scholar says the word “might better be translated as ‘injustice’...” (Richard B. Hayes, *1 Corinthians*, 227.) When we love we do not rejoice in injustice; we rejoice in the truth.

A few weeks ago Beth and I watched the 1976 movie *All the President’s Men*. As you know it’s the story of the work of reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of *The Washington Post* as they investigated the Watergate Scandal. We’d seen it before, but the acting and writing are superb, and the message is timeless. When we are

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loving, we do not rejoice in lies, injustice, or cover-ups; we rejoice in the truth, even if the truth is painful. As Jesus said, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

Finally, Paul turns to the third section of his sermon on love, and he says, “Love never ends.” Everything else, all the gifts we have, will come to an end. But not love. Love never ends.

Right now, he says, we don’t completely understand love. Right now we see as though peering at an imperfect, distorted mirror. We see love imperfectly. We see ourselves imperfectly. And we see God imperfectly. But one day we will completely understand. One day we’ll see God face to face. For now, we know that love is the key to understanding and using our gifts. Love is the center for how we relate to each other in community and how we understand ourselves and our calling. Love is what we learn to do in church as God prepares us to love others in ways we cannot always expect.

A retired minister says, “Some years ago I heard of a young priest in the first week of his first pastorate. A call came to this office of a husband and wife of his parish experiencing a hideous tragedy. The

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young father while backing his car down the driveway had crushed and killed his toddler who had crawled behind the wheels. The pastor ran out of his office, clutching his prayer book, his bottle of anointing oil, and his stole. Driving to the house he rehearsed exactly what he would say and do. He would pray. He would use words of comfort. He would explain God's mercy. He would help them plan the next steps. He ran through the open door, down the hall, and found the couple sitting on the edge of their bed, ashen, speechless, clutching each other's hands. The young pastor stopped, stared at them, dropped his book, his oil flask, his stole, his preconceived ideas on the floor, fell on his knees before them, wrapped his arms about both of them, and broke into sobs." (Flora Slosson Wuellner in *Weavings* August/September/October 2016, 44.)

When we leave this earth, as we all will, it won't matter whether we were famous or popular or clever or wealthy or powerful. It will matter how we loved. Love is what finally matters. So let us love God and love each other, and let us love the world.

"And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." ©Jeff Paschal