

Don't Talk of Love
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: I Corinthians 13

Imagine a world where nations cooperate together for the good of all. Peace reigns and justice flourishes. Imagine communities and work places where neighbors and colleagues value each other and share both responsibility for and the benefits of their labor. Imagine families in which husband and wife cherish each other and participate together in raising children who respect themselves and others. Imagine a place where no one feels alone or unworthy. Imagine a world of love.

The imagination is hard-pressed to see such a world, so at variance with the one we inhabit. Yet Christian faith has always affirmed that only love can create such a world; only love can transform the way people think and talk and act. The morning epistle lesson is often called "a hymn to love" because it is the apostle Paul at his most poetic, expressing in simple, soaring language the beauty of love. Without a doubt, it is the most requested scripture reading at weddings which forever links it in some people's mind to romantic love, the love that makes the world go round and men and women slightly crazy. But the apostle wasn't vying for a job as an American Greetings card writer. He was writing to a community of Christian people, who knew well the realities of conflict and support, friendship and fighting. In fact, this text follows immediately the one we examined last week, in which Paul celebrated the differences in people as evidence of God's grace. He concluded that section by reminding the people of the many gifts they possessed, but that he would show them "a still more excellent way." Listen for God's Word to us in the reading from the first letter to the Corinthian churches, in the thirteenth chapter, at the first verse. [I CORINTHIANS 13]

No one knows how the young man fell off the Manhattan subway platform onto the tracks, just as a train was speeding into the station. Several of the gathered crowd waiting for the train called out to the boy, to warn him of the approaching danger and to get out of the way. Before anyone knew it, a man had jumped onto the tracks himself and had grabbed the young man, but the train was nearly upon them. Thinking quickly, he pushed the boy down in the space between the tracks, lying over him as the train rolled safely above them. The rescue was heroic in any case; all the more so when it came out that the man had no relationship with the young man. "I just knew he was in trouble and had to try and help," he explained. Social scientists have long considered what motivates people to act on behalf of another, at risk to themselves. Case professor Steven Post has written extensively about this and correlated acts of altruism with emotional health and well-being. Self-giving love, it seems, may be hardwired into the human psyche. At the very least, there is evidence that the human instinct towards self-preservation enlarges to include others as well.

Only a very few of us, thank God, will ever be faced with such dramatic decisions. But every single one of us is faced every day with the choice to love or not. And some days, it requires almost heroic will to love the persons we encounter across the breakfast table, at the water cooler, in the pew:

Love is patient and kind ...even toward people who are clearly misguided, ignorant, or just plain wrong???!!

Love is not boastful, arrogant or rude...but what about those people who only 'get it' when you get in their face???!!

Love isn't irritable...Paul didn't have kids, did he???

Love doesn't insist on its own wayPaul didn't have parents did he?

Love isn't resentful...but what about the times I'm taken for granted, without so much as a thank you, thank you very much???!!

Love doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing ...except when they had it coming to them!!

Love bear all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things...too good to be true!

The trouble with this text is not that we don't understand its meaning! The trouble with this text is that it seems impossible to put into practice. Paul has described idealized qualities of love, suitable for framing, but so heavenly-minded they're of little earthly use. And yet the force of his words reminds us that love is essential; without love, no spirituality, no sacrificial giving, no inspired sermon matter at all. It is love that makes these gifts meaningful and transformative. It is loving relationships that demonstrate the goodness of high-minded theology, extravagant gestures of generosity, and profound truth. Without love, there are only empty words and actions, devoid of transforming power.

But to be essential, Paul writes, requires also that love be practical and active. Love does some things and resists doing other things. It is the subject of all the verbs in this passage. Don't *talk* of love, Paul would have sung along with Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*: Don't talk of love... show me! True love shows itself in real life contexts, where it refuses to retaliate, practices patience, shuns competitiveness, throws away a scorecard, remains hopeful. Christian love is not a theory, but a way of living. It is not even a mutual agreement we make with one another: I'll try to love you; you try to love me. It is the Christian's calling no matter what; no matter how it is received; no matter whether it is reciprocated.

...which suggests that Christian love is not a feeling; not the outcome of a certain resonance with another human being. Love is a decision; a choice we make about how we will dwell as an individual in a world of others. To love another means to consider that person's needs and well-being as well as one's own. And I think the last part of the text offers a clue as to how we might go about making a choice for this kind of love. It's alluded to in the contrast between the thinking of a child and that of an adult; the difference between the distorted reflection in a mirror and a face-to-face encounter. We know

so little about each other! We understand others primarily only as they appear to us—by the game face they put on to go to work, to school, even to church. We know many, many more “others” only as statistics, a blurred snapshot that does as much to obscure the particularity of individual lives as it does to reveal it.

When we are commanded by God through the voices of the prophets and by Jesus to love, we are actually invited to receive the divine gift that will free us from our fears and prejudices and allow us to know another. To see them as they truly are is to understand that they are equally beloved as children of God as we ourselves are. In a way, learning to love another is learning to love the self unconditionally; regardless of vulnerability, loneliness, fear or anything that distorts them—and every one of us.

One of the pleasures of my job is to work with couples who are preparing to marry. They are “in love” and when you’re in love, everything is different. Take the winter sky last week—how would you describe it? Would “grey” work? But when I spoke with a couple who are in love they said, “Oh but there are ten shades of grey, and they’re beautiful!” Oh right, I meant to say that. But I kept thinking about their words, and I realized that they had opened themselves up to seeing a January sky in Cleveland as something worth loving, rather than approaching it with dread, or only contrasting it with blue skies radiating glorious sunlight.

Could this be something that helps us love persons who may seem cold, petty, unpleasant, unbearable? To love the ten shades of grey—the person who, like each of us, is a beloved child of God. Because—and this is central---Christian love not only improves the lives of the loved. Loving is a liberating act that allows us to live free of fear, with open hearts and hands that are able to reach across all that divides us. Love is essential for living well.

In some ways I guess to love like that would be impossible, had it not been demonstrated to us by God in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus was no pushover; yet he continually pushed over the dividing walls we humans seem hell-bent on putting up, in order to bring us closer to one another and to God.

Of course you remember what happened when Jesus loved a little too well; when he'd finally let in too many outsiders, eaten with too many sinners and erased the boundaries once too often. He was executed for love, hung on a cross to die...and even then, did not insist on his own way: *Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*

But love like this is not destroyed. Love like this never ends. God raised Jesus from death, so that we might know that God loves and God forgives. Despite everything God is patient and kind toward us, not irritable or resentful. God does not mock our weakness, but rejoices over the truth that we are all God's beloved. For each of us and for all of us, God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

And that my friends, is why we are able to remove the walls that divide us. Why we are able to connect on a deeper level with people who are different from us. Why we are able to work for the wellbeing of a stranger, or even, amazingly the "enemy." Why we are able to welcome and care for one another in ways that will bring us wholeness. That is why, in fact, we are able to say at all: We love...because God first loved us!

This past week a number of Fairmounters and I attended what was billed as a community conversation sponsored by Heights Community Congress about race and diversity. Over 400 neighbors were there, and following the panel presentations, one by one individuals came to the microphone to ask questions, make statements, air grievances. Strong feelings were expressed; though the tone was always respectful. The evening came to an end long before the line of speakers did.

We were given an assignment to complete during the two weeks before the next conversation February 7th: gather a group of at least four individuals who are different from yourself. Just that. Spend time talking and listening, getting beyond the assumptions and presumptions, going below the surface to hear the pain, the hope, the fear, the faith that is not so unlike your own. Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face....now I know only in part, then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

Sounds like love to me. I wonder if we could practice too, with a co-worker, a family member, a neighbor, someone whose different perspective challenges or threatens us. Seek them out; get to know them; see if you discover that the things you hold in common are much greater than those that divide you. And even more, that we will come to recognize each other as we truly are: beloved children of God, lovable and capable of loving. Imagine....

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS. AMEN.

The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor