

“Fruits of the Spirit: Love”

1 Corinthians 13

June 21, 2020

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

Two things have happened in the life of this congregation this past week. First, today is Father’s Day; happy Father’s Day to all you dad out there. And second, on June 17 this congregation celebrated the 36th anniversary of the organizing of this congregation. Its nice to celebrate those blessings in our lives.

Today I am continuing a series of sermons on the fruits of the Spirit. Paul writes to the people of Galatia that we recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit among us based on the outward manifestations of the Spirit; how we relate to one another. What we do and the choices we make speak volumes about who we are. Paul says: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. If we claim to live by the Spirit they we will be guided by these fruit of the Spirit.” Today we are considering love. Paul describes the kind of Spirit filled love in his letter to the people of Corinth.

Prayer for Understanding:

Reassuring God, whose Word became flesh in Jesus, and whose healing touch empowered Christ, look upon us with compassion. Equip us to listen, to hear, to speak, to embody love that is patient and kind. May we bear, believe, hope, and endure, so that through us the world will hear good news, give up childish ways, and respond to the touch of your hand. Amen.

Read 1 Corinthians 13

Back in the days when I was in seminary some 35 years ago, I interviewed with a Presbyterian Church in Atlanta for a part-time youth ministry position. I was forewarned by some of my fellow students at Columbia Seminary that this church was rumored to be embroiled in deep conflict. Forewarned and a bit cautiously, I agreed to meet with their Youth Minister Search Committee. During our conversation I tried to ask questions which would enlighten me as to the source of the conflict. Finally, they relaxed and explained their situation. This particular church had been around for decades but the neighborhood surrounding the church had begun to change. What had once been a young thriving congregation had begun to age and die. Some of the younger newer members (and apparently it was not the same folks with whom I was interviewing) in the congregation had determined that for the church to begin to thrive again, they needed to be infused with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Well, I am never opposed to a good dose of the Holy Spirit for renewal and for a sense of new mission and broader understanding, so I pushed the issue a little. What was wrong about the Holy Spirit showing up in their midst? Bristling, they described how speaking in tongues had infiltrated their worship. Now admittedly I didn't understand the whole speaking in tongues thing, but Paul seems to endorse it, so again, I pushed the conversation a little further. Given that speaking in tongues is mentioned as a gift of the spirit in the New Testament, what is wrong with some folks speaking in tongues during worship? What was described for me was how speaking in tongues had become, not just an outward manifestation of the Holy Spirit, but a tool for measuring how spiritual you were or were not. Apparently, it was assumed

among some members of the congregation that if you did not speak in tongues, then you had not received the gift of the Holy Spirit. What was a gift had become a divisive tool. Needless to say, they didn't offer me the job and so I didn't have to politely decline.

This is exactly the kind of conflict which Paul addresses in his letter to the people of Corinth. Corinth was a prosperous commercial crossroads during Paul's lifetime. It overlooked two seaports north of what is today, Athens, Greece, and it became the preferred destination for merchants shipping goods between Italy and Asia. Paul founded a Christian Community in Corinth, spending 18 months among the people. Once the church was up and running, as was his custom, Paul moved on to the next town or village. Paul had been away from Corinth long enough that conflict had arisen between folks in the church concerning, among other issues, appropriate worship. The Corinthian Church members write to Paul seeking his advice and 1 Corinthians is his response, suggesting that they are at a spiritual crossroads. A spiritual or social crossroads. We are at a crossroads in this country today. And violent conflict, the kind of conflict which screams in people's faces, anger which is determined to hurt, destruction of property – this kind of violent conflict is not the answer, at least according to Paul. Will they heed Paul's advice or will their community disintegrate because of pride, rivalry, and spiritualized self-indulgence? Paul is hoping that his letter will provide him with enough time to travel back to Corinth to work with them in person, on conflict resolution.

I have officiated at hundreds of weddings over the course of my 30 plus years in ministry, and I think I can accurately report that I have read these words from the 13th chapter of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, each and every time. These words are so linked in our minds with images of frilly wedding dresses, bouquets of flowers, and

passionate kisses, that we need to be reminded that weddings were not on Paul's mind when he wrote these words. He was writing about the need for mutual concern and consideration within the community of the church with a special reference to the use of spiritual gifts in worship. Paul is all for spiritual gifts, but not if they become the tools for division within the family of faith. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I might as well be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." If those in the church do not do what they do in a spirit of love, then all knowledge and piety and sacrificial giving is for naught. The love Paul is speaking of is not romantic love, but a state of being within the community of faith. It is not primarily a feeling, but an action. This love – agape love – seeks not its own good, but the good of the one who is loved and the common good of the community is to be regarded more highly than partisan bickering and individual agendas.

Love is patient and kind, Paul says. That is Paul's definition of agape love -to demonstrate kindness and respect for all people, especially those who might be different in some way than ourselves. In everything we do we need to ask, "How do our own actions and relationships within our congregation and with folks in the community, express – or fail to express – love for one another?"

Agape love is not just a one-time action. One cannot merely decide in a day's time to start doing these things. They are learned patterns of behavior that must be cultivated over time in the context of community, a community that models and supports such behavior. We must learn patience; we must learn how not to keep score of wrongs done against us; we must learn not to be arrogant or rude. And in learning we must teach these things to our children by embodying these outward manifestations of agape love.

It's Father's Day. There were many times when I saw my father get mad, but he never reacted out of anger. He would hit the pause button and consider how to be proactive and constructive not destructive. In many ways, my father embodied these gifts of love. I can remember my dad receiving a phone call one afternoon; I was about 8 or 10 years old and I had just gotten home from some after school activity. My father's tone of voice on the phone was one of tremendous kindness and generosity, but also firmness. He was patient, kind, not resentful. When he hung up the phone, I quizzed him about who the other person was on the phone. He explained to me that he was talking with my mother's cousin, Patricia, who would call from time to time. He went on to explain to me that Patricia had lost her way; she was addicted to alcohol and her husband had just left her with two small children to care for. My parents was willing to help her, but not give money to her. The money would only continue to enable her addiction. My parents were always kind to Patricia, always patient (you see for folks to be helped, truly helped, they have to want it for themselves first and as the person who has the capacity to help, you must learn patience born of agape love). My parents never talked down to Patricia, never scolded her, and never rejoiced in wrongdoing. They always hoped and believed that Patricia had it within her to turn her life around. They never turned Patricia away; always responded to her calls and would help her as best they could without being condescending or arrogant. My parents embodied and therefore taught me the meaning of agape love.

This kind of love will never end, Paul says. Knowledge, gifts of the spirit – no matter how special we think they are – will come to an end. But not love. Agape love trumps all.

We only know in part and act constantly on the basis of incomplete information. So, recognizing that we only see dimly, we must love with humility and a sense of humor. Paul teaches us to remain open, don't pass judgment too soon concerning the cares and conflicts of present situations and particularly to what we think we know. None of us can reach the height of the kind of love Paul describes here in his letter to the Corinthians. All of us have room to grow. The standard, after all is set by God and made real in Jesus Christ.

Speaking to the people gathered for worship – the church – the people who are called to embody the love of Christ – not just talk about it but live it, Paul says:

Love bears all things,

Love believes all things,

Love hopes all things,

Love endures all things,

Now faith, hope, and love abide – but the greatest of these is love.