

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

*Rev. Ross Smillie*

February 3, 2019

## **The Greatest Gift**

*Now faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.*

– 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

“Love one another” Jesus once said, and how can you argue with that? Love is the greatest gift, the most excellent way, as the apostle Paul says so eloquently, the one ingredient without which every accomplishment is worthless, without which every virtue is debased to a vice. Love of God and love of neighbour are the two greatest commandments, as Jesus and the rabbis agreed. All of that is true, and yet...

Has love become a motherhood issue? Love is the subject of something like 90% of popular music, the topic of endless exploration in television shows, movies, and novels. “All you need is love,” sang the Beatles. “It’s easy... Love is all you need.”

But is it so easy? If everyone agrees that love is important, does it actually provide any guidance for our relationships with each other? If it is so easy, why do parents whose teenagers are addicted to booze or drugs have so much trouble figuring out how to love them? If it is so easy, why does it seem so inadequate to tell partners in an abusive relationship just to love one another? If it is so easy, what guidance does love offer us in the hospital when a family have to decide whether to terminate life support, or in climate change negotiations when we have to balance the self-interest of many nations, or in the classroom where complex decisions have to be made about how to meet the needs of many different children? It isn’t easy, and sometimes you need wisdom, training, experience, advice, negotiation, guidelines, rules and lots else besides to figure out what love means in any given situation.

If everyone agrees that love is important, has love become such an inoffensive, all-inclusive term that you can use it to justify pretty much anything? If the parent whose discipline borders on child abuse can argue that she did it out of love, don’t

we need a little more definition to the idea of love? If the pedophile defends his abuse of children on the basis of his love for them, don't we need to be a little bit more precise about what we mean by love? If the philanderer and the pornographer justify their cheapening of intimacy by appeals to 'free love,' don't we need to define what love entails in some more detail?

In the 1960's the most popular book on ethics argued that rules and laws are too rigid and inflexible as guides for action in morally complex situations, that they can never be detailed enough to address the complexities of every situation. Instead, it was argued, all we need is love. If we determine the loving act in a given situation, then we will know what the right thing to do would be. It seems like a very Christian ethic, since, as Paul says, "the greatest of these is love," and as Jesus and the rabbis agree, love of God and neighbour are the two greatest commandments.

But what an emphasis on love alone seems to suggest is that we should be able to solve all problems by the seat of our pants, by our intuition about what the loving thing to do in any given situation would be. The problem is that good people don't always agree about what the loving thing to do would be, and the emphasis on love alone doesn't help people to resolve those disagreements. In fact, it can turn a disagreement into a very personal battle over who is more loving.

The problem is that we don't know which action is more loving unless we have some example of love against which to measure it. And that is why, for those of us who seek to follow Jesus, his commandment to love shouldn't be separated from the person who gave the commandment. I started this sermon by quoting Jesus' commandment, to love one another, but I left something out of that quotation which is actually pretty important. Does anybody know what it is? "Love one another, *as I have loved you.*" In other words, the commandment to love is given content and form by the story of Jesus' life and ministry, by his healing and teaching, by his pursuit of truth and justice and his willingness to suffer and die. We know what love means because of Jesus' life; we know what love costs because of his suffering and death; we know that love is worth that cost because of his resurrection.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul has been dealing with a number of problems that have arisen in the church in Corinth. There are some in the church who are convinced that they are more knowledgeable than others, more spiritual than others. Some are proud of their ability to speak spiritual languages, for example, a practice still popular in Pentecostal churches. Some are proud of their ability to prophesy, and others are proud of their faith. But their pride is dividing the congregation rather than building it up. So Paul tells them that the sound of someone speaking in tongues (without love) is like the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard, that faith and prophecy (without love) is false faith, false prophecy, false hope. The Spirit gives different gifts to different people, and every gift is important to the community. No individual gift should be viewed as a source of pride, but as an opportunity to contribute to the well-being of the community. The church is like a body, he says, if one part of the body suffers, all the other parts feel its pain; if one member is honored, all the body is honored. And what holds the body together is this mutual love, this willingness to suffer and rejoice together.

This famous love chapter in 1 Corinthians is popular at weddings at least in part because it is a bit vague about the true cost of love: “It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things,” and that all sounds Ok, but then it adds this one bitter truth: love also “endures all things.” What!? What does love have to do with endurance? Maybe Hallmark should come out with a line of wedding cards on the theme of endurance: “On this special day, we wish you the endurance to be able to put up with each other for as long as possible!” “We pray that this wedding day is just the beginning of many decades of enduring each other!” I bet those would sell well!

And here is another one that we might puzzle over: “Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth?” What does love have to do with the truth?

My teacher Stanley Hauerwas once wrote that the cross is at the center of the Christian life because Christ beckons us to face the truth that the world is filled with suffering, injustice and cruelty. “As Christians our ethical task is to see the world as it is in the confidence that we can look upon and face the agony of the world without its destroying us.” [Vision and Virtue, p. 117]

Imagine a young man, the father of a young family, who has an incurable cancer. Some family members might think that the loving thing to do is to withhold the painful truth that he is dying in order to spare him the mental anguish of knowing that his life is coming to an end, and that his wife and children will have to go on without him. Surely, they might argue, the loving thing to do is to spare him the truth so that he can have as much happiness as possible in the time he has left. But if love rejoices in the truth, how can he be spared the truth? To do so is to spare him the opportunity to learn to live and to die well, to say farewell in his own unique way. To spare him the truth is to deny him of the honesty that he deserves from those who claim to love him. Often, in such situations, people avoid telling the truth because they are afraid themselves of facing the truth, and trying to spare themselves the suffering that true love entails. Love is not cruel, not arrogant, or boastful or rude. It does not intentionally inflict suffering, but it must often face suffering and endure suffering or it is not love. Love suffers with – which is what compassion means, to suffer with. Love endures.

And so love is measured, not by the depth of loving feelings on a wedding day, but by the ability to suffer together, the bad times as well as the good, in times of poverty as well as times of comfort, in sickness as well as health, in sorrow as well as joy. That is why Christian love is tested by its ability to face the reality of life in all its components without fear.

That is why, when the media attention has shifted from the latest disaster in Brazil, or the Philippines, or Kenya and others have moved on, we in the United Church are still supporting the people of those countries through the Mission and Service Fund and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. It is why we are building relationships with partners in some of the most conflicted countries on earth, because Jesus' life has given us the ability to walk together with people in the midst of struggle and pain and violence without fear.

That is why, when people here in Red Deer need healing or support, our pastoral care teams are offering support and care, our support of the Benevolent Fund, Safe Harbour and the Poverty Alliance is helping people struggling to make ends meet, because Jesus' life has given us the ability to accompany people facing illness, discrimination and poverty without fear. That is why, when people in this

congregation or community are dealing with illness or death, we in this church are able to accompany them right to the end, because we have learned through Jesus that we can face even the most difficult situations of life without fear.

There are complex questions in families, in schools, in hospitals, in communities that need people who can hang in there when the right thing to do is not certain, when the way out is not clear, when it is not even clear if there is a way out; there are difficult situations when we need people who will not seek the easy answer just because it is easy, but who will suffer with and suffer for and struggle and learn and debate and pray and wait until the best action among many poor choices becomes clear, because they have learned not to be controlled by their fear.

That is why Jesus says, "Love one another, as I have loved you," because he loved us through his life and death and new life, so that we might live and love free from fear of life as it really is. Amen.