

Date: September 24, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 25

SERMON: Love That Lasts

Text(s): 1 Corinthians 13

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Friday is my day off. If the weather is good, or at least decent, I try to spend some of the time outdoors making photographs. When the weather's not so good, I often spend Friday afternoons in my darkroom making prints. And when I'm in the darkroom on Friday afternoons, I usually listen to the Maine Public Radio program "Down Memory Lane" hosted by Toby Leboutillier. When I first heard it, I wasn't really sure I was going to like it, because I really don't care for Toby's voice; it sort of grates on me. But since there really wasn't much else on the radio on Friday afternoons worth listening to, I stuck with it, and now I'm hooked. Songs I thought I had long ago forgotten have brought back many memories and I've even grown to enjoy listening to what was on the front page of the Bangor Daily News 40 years ago today. It's a trip in a time machine to another planet in many ways—a true cross-cultural or at least cross-generational experience.

One of the things that listening to that show has brought home to me with new realization is that the vast majority, probably at least 95% (though I don't have any actual statistics to back up my impression) of the pop music we have listened to over the past century are love songs. Oh sure, back in the 60's and 70's there were some anti-war protest songs, and now and then you hear a song protesting consumerism or environmental destruction, but for the most part, we entertain ourselves with songs about romantic love.

And those songs really ring the changes on that theme. Every aspect of romantic love from the first crush of puppy love to the sound of wedding bells to the heartbreak of betrayal and infidelity are sung about. Both lyrics and tunes range from the extraordinarily silly to the near-sublime. In fact, if the repertoire of our popular

music were the only measure of reality, the Beatles were right when they sang, "All You Need is Love." Love does appear to "make the world go round," or so at least, we sing.

Perhaps just because we have been so profoundly influenced by our songs about love we don't really give the subject of love much real thought. After all, the sort of love we sing about in our pop music is, for the most part, the sort of love that is based in our emotions, our passions, our appetites. Sure there are songs about a deeper kind of love than mere romantic attraction, and lots of songs about the painful aspects of romantic love, but the vast majority are about romance, about the emotional chemistry between two people, about the spark and passion of it all, and of course, who can deny that erotic love, for that's what we're talking about, is what makes life exciting and interesting.

But we all know from our own experiences that not all love is romantic love, and not all love is exciting and interesting. We know, don't we, that sometimes love can not only be extraordinarily painful but extraordinarily difficult as well. Hearts can be broken, not only by the change of affections or sexual attractions of a romantic partner, but by the betrayal of a deep friendship or the helplessness of watching a beloved child make unwise or destructive choices or the frustration of trying to care for an aging parent or a spouse who's slipping into the nether world of Alzheimer's and leaving us behind.

Those experiences teach us that there's got to be more to love than the romantic feelings erotic desires we sing about in our pop songs. And sometimes, we feel as though we don't have the language to talk about these other dimensions of love. We invent new terminology—like the phrase "tough love," to try to get at these other dimensions, and some of them are useful and some are not. But they don't inspire many songs.

The Greek language, in which our New Testament was written, was a bit richer in its vocabulary of love. One four-letter word wasn't expected to do all the heavy lifting of trying to

understand such a complex and subtle part of our humanity.

We run into one of those other words for love in this wonderful, familiar hymn to love that we've heard this morning from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. I'd guess that the reason this passage is so familiar to us is that we often hear it read at weddings. It's almost certainly the most commonly-chosen passage of scripture by the majority of couples who get married in church. And for good reason, because it does express in such an elegant and concise way what kind of love is needed to make a good marriage, though marriage was not the subject on Paul's mind in his correspondence with the Corinthians.

For the past two weeks, we've been looking at what Paul says about the church to these Christians in Corinth. They were an enormously gifted and talented group of people. They were a diverse mix of Jews and Gentiles, different social strata, including slaves and slave-owners, different intellectual or educational levels, some of them being schooled in the Greek philosophers while others were merchants and tradesmen who probably didn't know Plato from Pluto or care.

Paul has commended them for their enthusiasm for the gospel of Christ, for their energy and their abundance of spiritual gifts. But he has also strongly criticized them for allowing their very diversity and gifted abilities to cause them to divide into competitive factions, to lose sight of the common good in pursuit of their individual viewpoints and agendas. As we have seen, he has reminded them that all their diversity stems from the one divine Spirit of God who breathes through them all. The exciting and sometimes exasperating diversity of ministries, activities, and services that are manifest in the life of this congregation are all expressions of the one God whose Spirit animates the whole body. He has also turned that equation around and reminded them that this diversity of gifts and ministries must never become the occasion for

breaking the unity of the church, which he likens to the body of Christ. As Christ is one, so the church must be one as well. As a human body is one person, so the church as the body of Christ must, with all its parts, all its members, represent the one Christ. When those outside the church looks at it, they ought to see men and women treating one another with respect and equality, not men relegating women to subordinate roles nor women disrespecting the men. Slaves and masters are to treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, servants together of the same Lord. Jews and Gentiles are to get past their historical and cultural and religious divides and recognize that their presence together in the church means that something new has come into existence— a humanity where these old distinctions has broken down. In his letter to the Christians in the province of Galatia, Paul put it this way, *“There is no longer Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, but all are one in Christ Jesus.”*

So when factionalism or personality clashes or gender roles or disputes over property or disagreements over politics or power struggles among the individual members cause division in the church, it's as though a single person has a major health crisis in which many vital organs are affected. When one part of the body is sick, the whole body suffers, Paul says. When one part of the body is ignored or treated with contempt, the whole body is weakened. It cannot perform what it is called upon to perform, which is manifesting the wholeness of the life of the risen Christ by being a community of reconciliation and justice and peace.

The question is, how to do that? How do we as a church avoid mirroring in our own life together the brokenness and alienation of the world around us? How do we mirror, instead, the oneness and unity of God? How do we model what resurrection life looks like? How do we remain united in the midst of diverse opinions, diverse gifts, diverse agendas, diverse

backgrounds, diverse social contexts? How do we remain one body in Christ while giving full freedom to all the individual members that make up the body?

Paul's answer is "Love is all you need." But not the sort of love most of the pop songs have as their subject. Actually, John Lennon probably had something like this love in mind, and so, perhaps, that particular pop song does get close to Paul's meaning. As we reflect on this wonderful hymn to love, we realize that the kind of love Paul is talking about is rooted somewhere other than in our emotions, our feelings. That sort of emotionally-based love, the Greeks expressed with the term *eros*, from which, of course we get our word erotic. Instead, the word he uses is the word *agápē* I suppose the nearest English equivalent would be the word "commitment" or perhaps "covenantal love." This particular word *agápē* is a love that is rooted not in erotic feelings, not in kinship loyalties, not in our emotions at all. It's a love that is rooted in our wills. It's love that is expressed through commitments we make and actions that we do. It is a covenant to always act in the best interest of the other person to the best of our abilities. It puts the needs and health of the whole body ahead of our own individual interests or convenience. It is love that does not depend on the lovability or worthiness of the other person. It is the sort of love that God has for us.

Look at that list of qualities that characterize this sort of covenantal love: "*Love is patient* (hoo-boy, I'm in trouble on that one!), *love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;* (Uh-oh! This is getting pretty uncomfortable.) *It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.*"

I wonder how different our world would be if all of us simply memorized those few

sentences and repeated them each morning when we woke up? And such a transformation of the world is exactly Paul's goal. That's why he places so much importance on the church as the risen body of Christ. Paul knows that God's ultimate goal for creation is for a world where human beings may be at home, living together in harmony with their environment and with one another, relating to one another in justice, so that the end result may be peace—*shalom*—as Paul's own tradition of Judaism had long taught him. A world at peace, in harmony with God and all God's creatures. So Paul says, in effect, in order for the world to get there someday, it has to be able to see what a just and peaceful community looks like. Not a Disney-fied version of justice and peace, full of nice, glossy, middle-class folks, but a real community with all the diversity, all the cranky personalities, all the beautiful and the not so beautiful, all the fire and passion and pain of real life, but with it all channeled and working together for the common good. And that's the mission of the church—to be that community where God's ultimate goal for creation begins to become visible right here and now. Or as evangelist Tom Skinner once put it so memorably, "The church is to be the visible model on earth of what's happening in heaven."

That's a pretty tall order. And Paul recognizes that. It's why right in the middle of this letter to the Corinthians, he plunks down this lovely, elegant, powerful hymn to love—*agápē* love. Love that starts in the will, love that begins with a commitment, a decision to act in certain ways and not to act in certain other ways, and here's the important (and hard!) part, *regardless of how we feel.*

Feelings, as we very well know, are as changeable as the weather. Feelings change according to the situation, according to the circumstances, according to the likability or unlikability of the other person, according to what we ate for breakfast or whether we had our second cup of coffee or whether the baby was up

crying all night or whether we had a horrible day at the office. Anything and everything is likely to affect our feelings, and if we only act lovingly when we feel like it, then we'll probably find ourselves pretty lonely. Real love does not depend on our feelings; it's a decision we make to act lovingly toward others whether we feel like it or not or whether they're likeable or not.

C. S. Lewis once said that disliking someone is no more a sin than indigestion. Liking or disliking has everything to do with personality and temperament and mutual interests. In other words, it's circumstantial. Love isn't about liking; it's about behaving. How I feel about someone is irrelevant; how I behave toward them, how I act in their best interests to the best of my ability is the test of whether I am loving or not.

Put that way, love isn't so easy, is it? It's just downright hard work. It takes constant practice. It takes constant repentance and forgiveness. It takes constant communication. It takes constant and ruthless honesty about our own motives. Love can be exhausting.

But, it's the only way to become truly human, to fully realize our identity as beings created to be the bearers of God's image. To love someone with covenantal love is the only way to truly know ourselves or the other. It's the only way to experience genuine community. It's how we become real. It's also the only way to truly know God, for as St. John tells us, "*the one who loves is born of God and knows God, for God is love.*" This kind of love is nothing less than the ground on which we and the whole world stand. It is the Really Real, the only thing that lasts. Paul puts it so unforgettably and so elegantly as he concludes, "*So faith, hope, and love remain, these three. And the greatest of these is love.*"