

The Transforming Work of Love
Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA

Transfiguration Day
February 14, 2010

I Corinthians 13, Luke 9:26-43

Our first lesson for today comes from the 13th Chapter of the Apostle Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. It is often read at weddings. But you should know that I Corinthians as a whole and I Corinthians 13 in particular were not originally written as instruction for couples about to be married, although it serves that purpose well. It was written to a community of faith which found itself in conflict and turmoil from time to time (actually fairly frequently). It was written to a community of faith that was marked by people who thought they knew a lot. They were known as Gnostics. They thought they had spirituality all figured out. They prided themselves on their secret knowledge, their superiority. Paul was writing to this group of people in particular - people who were arguing amongst each other about who had the right knowledge, who had the clearest, purest, understanding of God.

Eugene Peterson writes of I Corinthians 13 that it "is a classic of pastoral response: affectionate, firm, clear, and unswerving in the conviction that God among them, revealed in Jesus and present in his Holy Spirit, continued to be the central issue in their lives, regardless of how much of a mess they had made of things. Paul doesn't disown them as brother and sister Christians, doesn't throw them out because of their bad behavior, and doesn't fly into a tirade over their irresponsible ways. He takes all of it more or less in stride, but also takes them by the hand and goes over all the old ground again, directing them in how to work all the glorious details of God's saving love into their love for one another."¹

I share this context about I Corinthians, not because I believe we here at Immanuel are a community that really reflects what was going on in Corinth, but simply so that you have an understanding of what Paul was addressing when he wrote these words. Listen now as Paul speaks to the Corinthian church and to all of us as we live out what it means to be in relationships with one another, with the larger world, with neighbors near and far, with parents, spouses, partners, and children and siblings. Listen now for God's word in I Corinthians 13. *Read I Corinthians 13.*

Our second lesson comes from the Gospel of Luke the 9th chapter. In addition to today being Valentine's Day, which happens every so often on a Sunday, today is also *Transfiguration Sunday*, the day when we celebrate that Jesus went up on a mountain and was revealed in his glory to his three closest disciples. And while he was revealed in his glory there were two Old Testament characters on either side of him: one was Moses, and the other was Elijah. Moses was a man of the mountain, and so was Elijah. Moses, if you remember went up on a mountain and there he received the tablets of the Ten Commandments. He also was on a mountain when he looked into the Promised Land that he was not able to enter.

Elijah was a man of the mountain, too. At one point in his ministry, on a mountain, he went toe to toe with the prophets of Baal, seven hundred of them. Later in his ministry, when he was on the run from Queen Jezebel, he was again on a mountain: doubting the presence of God, worried, stressed, depressed. And he was listening for the voice of God - and the text of I Kings 19 says: the Lord was not in the earthquake, the Lord was not in the wind, the Lord was not in the fire, but the Lord came to him in the still small voice, or the sound of sheer silence. So Moses representing the law and Elijah representing the

prophets were on either side of Jesus, who, in Luke's understanding, was the fulfillment of both of those things.

As you hear the text, note how it continues from Jesus being on the mountain and the disciples wanting to stay up there with him down into the valley, where the work of love so often has to be done. Listen now for Luke's account of the Transfiguration. *Read Luke here.*

Happy Valentine's Day! Did you get cards and flowers and candy for your loved ones? There is still time. At least that's what I am counting upon. At a Forum over in the Meeting House preceding this service, the Spiritual Growth Council guided us in a workshop focusing on love - love for God and love for neighbor - and how that love can play itself out in our lives. It was wonderfully attended and I am grateful to all of you who made it so.

Just as Paul emphasizes love in the passage I read from 1st Corinthians, it is the first of the spiritual fruits that Paul talks about when he addresses the Galatians with his famous passage on the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. The Spiritual Growth Council and Dan and I hope that this morning's forum on love served as a little appetizer to hopefully encourage you to sign up for the *All Church Retreat* we will be holding at Massanetta Springs Conference Center down in Harrisonburg the weekend of *April 24 and 25*, a retreat that will focus on the rest of the spiritual fruit, the natural outgrowth of the Spirit's activity in our lives. But back to love and the passages I read today.

One of the great modern misconceptions about love, whether it be between spouses or partners in a long-term committed relationship, whether it between close friends or acquaintances drawn together in a community, whether it be between us and God or between us and our neighbors near at hand or far away, is that it is finally about how we how we feel from moment to moment and day to day. That is the misconception: that love is finally about how we feel. Thanks in part to the greeting card industry and in part to the images with which we are bombarded on TV and in the rest of our media, our modern culture's notion of love has become so romanticized, so tied to the whim of emotion and the vagaries of appearance, that it has lost connection with the Biblical notion of love, which is much sturdier than feeling or attraction. It is not that romance and sentiment are unimportant in love relationships. Go ahead and buy the flowers and the candy and the jewelry. It is not that physical attraction doesn't have its place. It's just that love is a much sturdier reality than those things.

The Hebrew word used to talk about the love of God throughout the Old Testament is the word *chesed*, which means not just love, but steadfast love, reliable, abiding, unflinching love, a love upon which you can count. And though those of you going through the Year of the Bible might point to how God's love seems a bit more mercurial and unreliable than that early in Hebrew scriptures, from the very beginning it is clear there are expectations involved in the relationship between God and the people. By the time you get to the prophets, you get a sense that divine love, while it retains expectation, is also loath to write the people off. In the New Testament, you can see this love expanding to include the whole world, as Jesus embodies a love that is expressed through concrete actions of touching the untouchable lepers, healing the sick and broken, sitting down to eat with those who were rejected, outcast and despised, and not returning evil for evil or violence for violence to the point of dying on a cross. That's a far cry from a sentimentalized, mushy, sort of syrupy idea of love that takes little account of the hard work involved in real relationships between real flesh and blood people.

Love takes work. This is an idea that anyone who has ever been through premarital counseling with me, and anyone who has ever been to a wedding at which I have officiated, has heard me expound upon before. This past Labor Day weekend, I married Jonathon Dunlap and Katie Jackson. After the ceremony, which took place in a meadow under an arbor, I received one of the finest compliments I've

ever received - from the bride's grandmother, our own Carolyn Evans. She pulled me aside and told me, "You tied that knot really tight." And she told me the same thing when Katie's sister Elizabeth married Jared Smearman during that big snowstorm here in December.

Even in the best, most clearly God-ordained relationships, love takes work. I remember an older couple in the church I served in Statesville, N.C. telling me that they never had to work at their relationship a day in their lives. And I thought to myself, "Who are you trying to fool? I know the two of you. I know you are not always that easy to get along with. But more than that, I know some of what life has dealt you in terms of tragedy and illness." It was clear that they were well-matched and abundantly evident that they loved each other, but I don't believe for a moment that there weren't times when Henry and Lucille had to work at their relationship.

Last weekend, Luayne and Derrick Crandall were down in Florida for the sixty-fifth anniversary of her parents' marriage. I know Denton and Lois. They are wonderful people and easy to get along with. But I know, too, that there surely have been times when they had to work at their relationship. Love takes work.

According to Paul in the famous "love chapter", love is not a feeling, not an emotion, but a set of actions, or practices. It involves doing some things and avoiding doing other things. And that goes not just for love between spouses and partners, but any other kind of love worthy of the name - whether it be lived out between friends or between acquaintances in communities, whether it be in our relationship with God or with our neighbors, love takes work.

Here is some of the work that Paul talks about in relation to love. *Love is patient.* Patience is not everyone's strongest suit, I understand. And earlier this morning, when I was at the stop light at Kirby and Dolley Madison, pounding on my dashboard for the light to change, I wasn't very patient. To be patient with people and not just stop lights is to hang in there. It is to take the deep, cleansing breath. It is to not blow one's top. It is to bear with each other.

This doesn't mean you don't tell a hard truth that you feel needs to be told. This doesn't mean you put up with being abused, or go along with something that will be hurtful to you or to others. But to be patient means that you realize that not everything happens right now, that sometimes people need time to grow, and that not everyone is in the same place on their spiritual path. This doesn't mean that some marriages don't disintegrate. But patience means you hang in there with those you are called to love.

Love is kind. I have seen a lot of kindness over the course of the past few weeks. I think of people shoveling out friends, neighbors and even strangers. I think of people who helped shovel Immanuel out, most specifically Craig Saunders. And I think of people not just praying for but looking for concrete ways to help the men, women and children of Haiti, including sending money through various organizations. Snowstorms and earthquakes have a way of bringing out the best, the kindness in us. Though I have to say there was a time after this past snowstorm, when I'd shoveled out my own spot and three other spots in our townhouse parking lot and came back and found the spots that I shoveled out occupied. Then I had to remember: patience, kindness.

There are snowstorms and earthquakes. But so often, in the everyday, humdrum rhythm of life, we forget to be kind to the people closest to us. Kindness involves actions - the sincere word of affirmation or gratitude, the warm embrace when a person wants and needs a hug, the flowers, the candy, the jewelry.

There is kindness involved in love. It makes me think of the wonderful words of the song by David Friedman, words I first heard Kathryn Mackensen sing at one of her cabaret nights, sponsored through the auction. Brian, I am not going to sing it! I won't even share with you the lyrics to the whole song. But right at the beginning she gets to the heart of the matter.

*So many things you can't control
So many hurts that happen everyday
So many heartaches that pierce the soul
So much pain that won't ever go away*

*How do we make it better?
How do we make it through?
What can we do when there's nothing we can do?*

*We can be kind
We can take care of each other
We can remember that deep down inside
We all need the same thing
And maybe we'll find
If we are there for each other
That together we'll weather whatever tomorrow may bring.²*

Do you hear what Friedman is saying about kindness? He's saying that kindness can be transformative.

Paul goes on to list a whole series of things that love is not: *it is not envious, or arrogant, or boastful or rude. It does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice in wrongdoing.* Here again, what is called for is action, not emotion. And the action is the practice of gratitude. When I am grateful for who I am and what I have, I learn to appreciate and not judge my circumstances. This has a way of doing away with envy, arrogance, boasting and rudeness. I see that what I have is grace, not something I have earned. It is the gift of life and love.

There is a Catholic priest by the name of Richard Rohr who writes about spirituality. One of the interesting things Rohr says about spirituality is that one very good way of assessing our spiritual health is to notice what we do with pain. Do we transmit it? Or do we transform it?³ In other words, when we experience pain, do we pass it on to others, like the guy who comes home from work and kicks the cat? Or do we transform it into treating others with more compassion?

What do we do with pain? What Paul was asking the Corinthian church to do was to not pass on their pain by being arrogant and rude and envious, but to transform it, to let it be transfigured. A colleague of mine writes that her mother once told her this: "Honey, bullies just bully out of their own hurt inside as though they have to spread it."⁴ What Paul was saying to the Corinthian church is that there is no need to spread that pain. Instead, let it transform you. Let it transform you rather than cripple you.

This week I've been thinking about two children's movies, movies I really enjoy. One of them is Shrek, which I thought mistakenly was by Disney but is apparently by Dreamworks. I was corrected after the first service. People are very kind that way! The wonderful thing about the movie Shrek, Shrek II in particular, is that the ogre marries this beautiful princess voiced by Cameron Diaz and she becomes an ogre herself. She gives up her beauty to be in relationship with him. She is more beautiful as an ogre because she can meet him where he is. And that love transforms him.

The second movie, and this one is in fact by Disney, is the movie *Beauty and the Beast*. I remember realizing the last time I watched it, that the transformation of the Beast doesn't happen just like that, all in one moment. It happens instead gradually, over the course of time, as he begins to realize and trust that Belle really loves him, just the way he is, warts, and fur and fangs and all.

That's the kind of love that God has for us. Now we see in a mirror dimly. But then we will know that truth face to face. Now we know only part. But then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known.

In Jesus name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002) p.2064

² David Friedman, "We Can Be Kind". You can find this song through Midder Music, and in his song book, *Listen to My Heart*. To find out how to purchase the song or albums on which it can be found., go to [http://www.middermusic.com/DavidFriedmanSongbook.htm#Songs in Your Key](http://www.middermusic.com/DavidFriedmanSongbook.htm#Songs%20in%20Your%20Key)

³ I gleaned this insight second hand, not directly from Richard Rohr, but from a blog post "Not Your Typical Valentine's Day Love" by Nadia Bolz-Weber in the February 11, 2010 edition of Sojournmail, an e-newsletter distributed by the Sojourners Community. Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran pastor living in Denver. You can find the post at <http://blog.sojournal.net/2010/02/10/not-your-typical-valentines-day-type-love/>

⁴ This again, comes from Nadia Bolz-Weber's February 11, 2010 blog post.