

Love Abides

A Sermon preached by J. Stuart Taylor III
St. Mark's Presbyterian
January 28, 2007

“Love is patient, 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; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends”. How many times have I read these words at wedding ceremonies and then turned to the bride and groom to say: will you take this man to be your wedded husband, and will you take this woman to be your wedded wife. And of course, the words of 1 Cor. 13 are lost on bride and groom who are either thoroughly enraptured with one another or nervous beyond agitation. And the words of 1 Cor. 13 are lost on all of us who are invited to the wedding because of that deadly familiarity with the text that makes our minds automatically shut off when we hear it. We hold up love in the context of the marriage of two people and the covenants they are making with one another. To speak about love is to speak about the whole of the Christian Gospel. And about the covenant of love that we are called to, a covenant not just in marriage but also with God and with all of life.

Love is a subject about which we all know something but none of us, none of us knows enough. I recently saw again the movie *Life is Beautiful* that is an eloquent testimony to love. The director of the movie Roberto Benigni is also the male lead who is a comic genius combining a little of Charlie Chaplin, Groucho Marx and Stan Laurel all in one. He plays Guido a Jewish waiter in Italy in the 1930's who is in love with Dora a catholic who is engaged to a rich fascist. Guido uses humor and imagination not only to win Dora's heart but as a weapon against the evil racism and anti-Semitism of Fascist Italy. Dora and Guido marry and have a son named Joshua and their family relationships are a joy to watch. Guido makes everything fun. But when Guido and his son Joshua are taken to a concentration camp Dora voluntarily goes along with them. To survive the horror, Guido tells his son Joshua that it is all a game and that they will win the prize of an armored tank. Even in the midst of the evil and suffering of a concentration camp, Guido is able to smile and laugh with transcendent hope and to make Joshua smile and laugh as well. Gaiety is the reckless ripple over the depths of despair. Roger Ebert says insightfully that *Life is Beautiful* is not about Fascists and Nazi's. It is about the human spirit. It is about rescuing whatever is good and hopeful from the wreckage of dreams. It is about hope for the future and about the necessary conviction or delusion that life is going to be better for our children than it is right now. In the ultimate expression of love, Guido sacrifices his own life to save his son. *Life is beautiful* is a testimony to the power of humor and to faith, hope, and love.

What can we learn from 1 Cor. 13 about the nature of love? The Love chapter is a part of a complex letter or series of letters by which Paul spoke to the flesh and blood reality of the Christian community in Corinth. In the midst of an abundance of spiritual gifts poured out on the church in Corinth there is a very different spirit at work- ego, privilege, jockeying for power and status. While Paul on the one hand celebrates all those gifts for leadership, the Apostle challenges the church to see that all spiritual gifts are held up to the criterion of love. On this Sunday in which we ordain and install a new class of officers the Apostle might have something to say to St. Mark's about love. Like the church in Corinth, St. Mark's is a community of faith that is blessed by a multitude of leaders, all possessing spiritual gifts. And this new class of officers is no exception. On Friday, I had the honor to give a charge to Rebecca Cook as she was installed as the moderator of our Presbytery for the coming year. This morning I want to use Paul's words from Corinthians 13 to offer a charge to our new officers and to anyone who would be a leader in this congregation. Let us hear again the Apostle Paul's words as they speak to our context as a

congregation. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels...”, We need leaders who are Biblically literate with the capacity to speak to write, to articulate the needs of the church and the opportunities that we have for ministry. But Paul reminds us. If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge... St. Mark’s needs leaders with gifts of insight and understanding. We need people to apply knowledge from life and work experience whether it is in how to run a meeting, frame an agenda or to set a budget. We need leaders with the wisdom to be able to name and understand this moment that we are living through as a congregation. But St. Paul reminds us “if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and do not have love, I am nothing. And if I have all faith so as to remove mountains St. Mark’s needs leaders who have deep faith, who trust the God who has led us in the past and will lead us in the future. St. Mark’s needs faithful leaders who know the history of this Congregation, and who believe in the special mission that God has given to us. We need leaders who believe that just around the corner there are tremendous opportunities that await St. Mark’s. But St. Paul reminds us if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast... we need leaders who understand deeply that the Gospel calls us to costly discipleship. The Gospel calls us to the risky mission of social justice. The Gospel asks everything from us. But St. Paul reminds us if I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

And then 13 shifts as Paul speaks to the character of love as it is lived out in always changing situation of everyday life. “Love is patient, 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; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth”. I was reminded of the words of the psychologist Robert Johnson in his book *We*, where he writes: “ Many years ago a wise friend gave me a name for human love. She called it “stirring-the-oatmeal” love. She was right. Within this phrase if we will humble ourselves enough to look, is the very essence of human love. Stirring the oatmeal is a humble act- not exciting or thrilling. But it symbolizes a relatedness that brings love down to earth. It represents a willingness to share ordinary human life, to find meaning in the simple, unromantic tasks: earning a living, living within a budget, putting out the garbage, feeding the baby in the middle of the night. To stir the oatmeal means to find the relatedness, the value even the beauty, in simple and ordinary things, not to eternally demand a cosmic drama, an entertainment, or an extraordinary intensity in everything. Like the rice hulling of the Zen monks, the spinning wheel of Gandhi, the tent making of St. Paul, it represents the discovery of the sacred in the midst of the humble and ordinary.” Stirring the oatmeal love: Wise counsel for a couple on their wedding day. Wise counsel for a new leader being installed as an officer of the church. Wise counsel for congregation that seeks to live a life of love.

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things”. Love is the dynamic moving force of life itself. Love is the tender affection shared between friends. Love is empathetic understanding of one person being able to imagine and enter into the pain and suffering of another. Love is faithful commitment and courageous loyalty to a person, a family, and a community when the going gets tough and the way forward is not always clear. Love is benevolent, generous, sacrificial; love seeks the others well-being and counts nothing more precious than the others life. Love is a kind of power, not power over but shared power with the other. Love is the power to affirm, to forgive, and to seek reconciliation, to support and encourage one another. And we are only able to grasp the depth of divine love when we have failed to be loving ourselves and we dimly perceive that we are forgiven, still loved, and unconditionally accepted. Love never ends. Or as the theologian Paul Tillich has taught us: love is the drive toward unity of the separated. Love unites individuals, Love unites individuals with

nature. Love implies relationship, interdependence, communion, and the ultimate oneness of all life. Love never ends but as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult I put an end to childish ways. Paul's words challenge all of us, not just our leaders to grow in love, to mature into the fully human. For now we see in a mirror dimly, we do not see clearly, we do not know everything, our perceptions are partial at best, a little light but much darkness, a few fragments but never the whole, life is a riddle, an enigma, we ponder the puzzling fragments of life. Every one of us is a fragment, a riddle to ourselves, sometimes boring, sometimes embarrassing, sometimes brilliant. As long as we are in this life, as Christian leaders and as human beings, we see in a mirror dimly and we ponder the enigma of our hearts and the mysteries of life in this world. But when we give ourselves to love we move beyond fragments to be able to touch the whole. When we give ourselves to love we move beyond the partial and temporary to experience the eternal.

“But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end”. Its not just material things that pass away. The temporal and transitory includes some of the highest spiritual gifts. All of this will pass away and that which remains will be love. And then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. The Creator is the Great Lover, Christ is the Beloved and the Holy Spirit is love itself. And we who are in Christ are swept up forever into this Trinitarian communion of love. And now faith, hope and love abide, these three and the greatest of these is love. And now let us be confident in our knowledge that God is love. That love is the liberating message of the Gospel. That love is the light that came into the world in Jesus Christ, that love is the essence of life and the salvation of the world, that our lives flourish in experiences of love; that the church celebrates the love of God by striving to express love in all dimensions of our personal and social lives, that those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.