

“What’s Love Got to Do with It?”
Delivered Sunday, February 13, 2011
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1 Cor. 12:12-18, 27-13:13

On this day before Valentine’s Day our scripture reading contains one of our most cherished expressions of love. And just as Valentine’s Day celebrations have traveled far from their earliest Christian origins, so First Corinthians 13 is often heard outside of its biblical context. The association of Valentine with romantic love is largely due to the 14th century work of English writer Geoffrey Chaucer, but Valentine was a 3rd century saint, martyred for acts of charity among the early church during severe persecution. I don’t mean to suggest anything wrong with tomorrow’s exchange of Valentines, chocolate and flowers, only to point out that to remember Saint Valentine is also to recall sacrificial acts of charity among early Christian people.

Similarly, there is nothing wrong with reading First Corinthians 13 at weddings. Surely the promises to love “in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live,” take flight on the wings of – “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” However, it is worth noting that Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth was not meant to embrace a starry eyed twosome whose love for one another stands softly illumined by radiant family, friends and candlelight. Paul’s words are meant for the church, for the widely diverse community of people, called by God to love each other across all kinds of differences and disagreement.

If you read chapters 12 and 13 together as we have today, you realize that each needs the other. Chapter 12 about the body – needs Chapter 13 about love – like a hand needs a heart. Chapter 13 longs for chapter 12 in the manner that love in community is complex, and hard work. First Corinthians 12 explains how differently gifted people are needed to help the church fulfill its purpose. Paul speaks of the church as a body, to show how interrelated we are: without the opposable thumb, the fingers are useless; you can’t walk straight if your inner ear is all messed up; eyes need a mind if they are really to see. “You are the body of Christ,” he says to people who were arguing about all kinds of matters related to what they believed and what the church was supposed to be like. “Faith, hope, love abide – these three, but the greatest of these is love,” are words meant to hold a fractured church together. Concerned by how we have so domesticated these words about love, one New Testament scholar says the text needs to be “rescued from the quagmire of romantic sentimentality in which popular piety has embedded it... For they are not about romance, sentiment, or how to behave with people who like us. They are about an otherwise outrageous way to respond to those who do not like us.” (1)

They are about how to behave because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. They are about being members of the body of Christ, when some of us think

ourselves more essential than others, and are eloquently reminded that the head - needs the foot - needs the stomach - needs the voice, and the lifeblood connecting us all is love. By the very nature of the church we are called to be in community with people who are dissimilar. Unlike any club, or institution, or civic group you might belong to, we are bound together less by our commonality than our diversity. Our common witness is to glorify and love God forever, and to testify to the power of Christ in our lives, but the way we go about that is - as they say - like herding cats. Each member of the church brings unique gifts, distinct commitments, and various points of view. We show forth the love of Christ by loving one another across our differences.

There are some who are saying the “institutional church is dying” these days. *The Wall Street Journal* implied that in a recent article about Mainline Denominations entitled, “Where Have All the Presbyterians Gone?” Well, when we think of the church as “institution” we might as well give up on it. Neither Jesus nor Paul envisioned an institution. We are a body - a living, breathing, diverse, interdependent body that grows and moves and changes direction, and in each new era of being church together, we share the love we have come to know in Jesus Christ.

Presbyterian writer, Kathleen Norris, has written about her experience of returning to church after a long leave. “From the outside, churches can look like remarkably contentious places, full of hypocrites who talk about love while fighting each other tooth and nail. On the inside, however, it is a different matter, a matter of struggling to maintain unity as “the body of Christ” given the fact that we have precious little uniformity. I have only to look at the congregation I know best, the one I belong to. We are not individuals who have come together because we are like-minded. That is not a church, but a political party. We are like most healthy churches, I think, in that we can do pretty well when it comes to loving and serving God, each other, and the world; but God help us if we have to agree on things ...”

And then, Norris says this: “At the risk of exposing myself as a terminal optimist, I’d say that things are as they should be. As contentious as we seem to be as a church, we are no less so than the fractious congregations of the Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians, and Galatians addressed by St. Paul. Can we consider it a good sign - a sign of life - that Christians have continued to fuss and fume and struggle, right down to the present day? It may look awful from the outside, and can feel awful on the inside, but it is simply the cost of Christian discipleship... Norris concludes: The church is ... a human community, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who say and do cruel and stupid things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts. That is why it is called the Body of Christ.” (2)

Today we welcome fifteen new members to Shandon. Unbelievably gifted. Deeply committed. Educators, health care professionals, business people, mothers, fathers, single people, new friends all. They come to us from the nurture of Presbyterian, Baptist, Lutheran, Congregational and Catholic churches. Some have long been faithful to the churches from which they come; others have lapses in membership and activity. Some have come easily to this decision; others are taking a huge leap of faith on their spiritual journey to say they want to belong here. In the

church, they have experienced great joy, and also pain, and ambivalence about belonging to any church. I believe the Spirit of God has led them here, and as imperfect as we might be in our corporate calling – we are nonetheless – the beautiful, diverse and living body of Jesus Christ.

This is why – every time Shandon receives new members I am fond of thanking God for making this old congregation a new church today. What do we have in common? Trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Are we all going to get along all of the time? Probably not. How are we related to one another, then? We are diverse members of one body. What's love got to do with it? Everything. Absolutely everything.

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation Commentaries.
- 2) Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, p. 272.