

THE GREATEST OF THESE

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Mark D. Hostetter

April 26, 2009

Scripture: John 15: 7-12

1 Corinthians 13: 4-8a, 13

“And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

How often have we heard these verses? Again and again and again, over and over, wedding after wedding. Don't we need a break? Even children know it's from Corinthians, and those who don't even own a bible. The words are so repeated, and greeting card packaged, they've almost lost all spiritual meaning. Is this what Christianity's about?

For the past two decades, to be called a “Christian”, seemed to be something altogether different. Few in my business circles would stand up and be counted when asked “Are you a Christian?” Those were fightin' words.

Some of you may have heard the story about a drunk who stumbled upon a baptismal service on Sunday afternoon down by the river. Well, the man proceeds to walk down into the water and stand next to the preacher. The minister turns and notices the old drunk and says, "Mister, are you ready to find Jesus?" The drunk looks back and says, "Yes, Preacher, I sure am." The minister then dunks the fellow under the water and pulls him right back up. "Have you found Jesus?" the preacher asked. "No, I didn't!" said the drunk. The preacher then dunks him under for quite a bit longer, brings him up and says, "Now, brother, have you found Jesus?" "No, I have not, Reverend." The preacher in disgust holds the man under for at least 30 seconds this time, brings him out of the water and says in a harsh tone, "My God, man, have you found Jesus yet?" The old drunk wipes his eyes and says to the preacher, "Are you sure this is where he fell in?"

Newsweek's cover story this week is titled “The Decline and Fall of Christian America.” The percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen 10 percentage points over the last twenty years. The article asks the question: “What then does it mean to talk about Christian America. The religious right has long believed that the US should be a nation whose political life is based upon and governed by their interpretation of biblical and theological principles. If the church believes drinking to be a sin, or abortion, or same-sex marriage, then the laws of the state should ban them. That project has failed, at least for now.”¹

And thank God for that. In the end, how different is that vision, really, from the Taliban's imposition of their particular brand of fundamentalist law, judgment, and punishment, on provinces in Pakistan and Afghanistan? It can't be about the establishment of religion.

The archbishop of Canterbury once said, “it is a mistake to think that God is chiefly or even largely concerned with religion.” And from the Bible: Amos, chapter 5, verse 21. “The Lord says, ‘I hate and despise the sound of your solemn assemblies, your religious celebrations and your times of worship.’”

The Sermon on the Mount, and all Jesus' teachings for that matter, are about what we are to do, how we are to act, to strive to make gentle the life of the world. Christianity's claims transcend any political order.

So many have tried to define Christianity. I've mentioned before Jack Haberer, a Presbyterian pastor who wrote a book for and about Presbyterians, called "God Views".² He divided us, and maybe all Christians, divided us into five camps, five distinct senses or perceptions of how to respond to God's call, and he gave them all names: The truth-seeking Confessionalist. The God-hungry Devotionalist. The church-focused Ecclesiast. The service-oriented Altruist. The social justice Activist.

But it's all in the eye of the beholder. At their worst, you might coin less complimentary terms for the various ways of being a Christian. How about Judgmentalist, Isolationist, Superspiritualist, Secularist, Exclusionary Elitist?

In thinking about today's sermon and today's scripture verses, I began to think maybe there's an easier way -- maybe it's not so complicated; maybe there's a simpler construct. Just look at today's oh-so-familiar verses from First Corinthians: And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

Faith. Here, of course, they've got to be talking about faith in God. Not faith in the church, not faith in our confessions, not even faith in scripture. Faith in God.

This nuance was key to the reformers, Luther and Calvin and Zwingli. They recognized that idolatry was an ever-present danger in Christian life, and it occurred when we placed something other than God in God's place. It could be the church, or a statue or a picture, or some doctrine or moral position, or a church leader, or even the Bible.

Now it may seem strange to think of the Bible in terms of idolatry, but when the Bible itself takes on the aura of the divine, when it becomes God for us, we run the danger that it becomes an idol. The Bible is central to be sure – it is to be available, to be lived with, sweated over, argued about. But it is not to be worshipped.³

So, as for faith, it's faith in God.

In a way, our faith is so much more difficult than the faith of those first Easter disciples. After all, they were there. They saw the horror of the cross, the torture, the pain, the death of one they loved. And then witnessed firsthand the unimaginable, the incomprehensible -- they saw, they touched the risen Jesus. For us, we just have to take it on faith.

I often wonder how those without God's gift of faith, faith that there is something greater and more powerful than this world, faith that there is something after this life, whatever that may be, I wonder how anyone can make their way through the deepest shadows of death, of a loved one, or of their own limited time here on earth.

Faith is one of our greatest blessings.

In these weeks after Easter Sunday, even our analysis of Jesus' resurrection – did it really happen or not – is tied to our faith. Jon Walton has pointed out, “it all boils down to one thing, one lingering question that, if you can answer it, will settle all questions about the resurrection and almost any other question of faith for that matter. The question is, ‘Just how good do you think God is?’ If nothing is too wonderful for God, if God is finally good beyond imagining, gracious beyond understanding, kind beyond expressing, and powerful beyond describing, then the resurrection is simply the most likely thing that God could do.”²⁴

OK, so we'll keep faith on our Top Ten, maybe even our Top Three List.

Hope. Now that's something we seem to have been focused on quite a bit over these last six months. You've got to have been in an isolated salt farm on the bottom of the deep sea trench, or tramping through the deepest rainforest, or maybe just emerging from a medically-induced coma, to have missed the spirit of hope that has surrounded and permeated and sustained and inspired our country through this economic recession or depression or apocalypse or whatever you call it. And the spirit of hope that a fresh start, a new approach, a vision of a changed world order, that our new president has given us, and the world.

Yet as wonderful as those examples are, our Christian hope is even deeper. Our hope, the hope of God's people, is the hope of the Old Testament Psalms, and of Israel in the wilderness. It's the hope that gives us confidence that we can make a difference, in homeless shelters and soup kitchens, in immigration petitions and sanctuary movements, in struggles against violence and abuse; in the face of surgery, of incurable cancer, in the face of life sentences without parole, in the face of deepest despair – yes, even there, hope abides.

Without vision, without hope, the people perish. It's hope that keeps us keepin'-on. It's hope that makes living worthwhile.

Hope is important, especially if we are just a little uncertain. Faith is one thing, firm and strong. But as the glimmer of doubt sneaks its way through, as we humbly acknowledge that we can't know for certain, hope gets the rest of us the rest of the way through. Faith may be for saints, but hope is for sinners.

So here's another one you may have heard: A man dies and goes to heaven. Of course St. Peter meets him at the pearly gates. St. Peter says, “Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in.”

“Okay,” the man says, “I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart.” “That's wonderful,” says St. Peter, “that's worth three points.”

“Three points?” he says. “Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service.” “Terrific!” says St. Peter, “that's certainly worth one point.”

“One point? Golly. How about this: I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans.” “Fantastic, that’s good for two more points,” Peter says.

“TWO POINTS!?!” the man cries. “At this rate the only way I’ll get into heaven is by the grace of God!”

“Exactly,” St. Peter says. “100 points! Come on in!”

So there’s faith, and hope. And finally, love.

The New Testament, of course, was written in ancient Greek. And for them, love was an important concept. So important in fact that, like the Eskimos who had more than one word for snow, the ancient Greek language of the bible, has at least three words for love. Eros, Philia, and Agape.

“Eros” was the kind of love in Plato, the classical Greek concept of desirous love, longing love, the soul’s upward longing for things beautiful, human striving for perfection from a place of imperfection. Our English word “erotic” comes from eros, but the concept in Greek is more than purely sensual. Eros is an effort on humanity’s part, self-assertion of a noble kind, an attempt to become like God because God is beautiful perfection. Eros is human love.

“Philia”, as you may be able to guess, signifies brotherly love. Philadelphia, the town of brotherly love, comes from this Greek word. It’s broader than just genetic family ties. Philia includes the traditional concepts of friends. Love for those close to us, love for those in our family, our communities, and our nation. Perhaps at its core, it’s the love for those who are like us. Philia, like eros, is a noble form of love, but shares with eros too an element of self-centeredness.

Eros holds fast to that which is desired. Philia holds fast to that which shares commonality.

The third kind of Greek love is “agape.” Agape love originates from God. Unconditional, spontaneous, unearned, agape love is not based on the condition or the behavior or the worthiness of the one loved. Agape love creates value itself, imparts value by the very act of loving. It’s not a reward for the value of the object, but creates value by the act of love.

It represents God’s love for humankind, and our special love for God. Agape love is the love Paul writes about in First Corinthians chapter 13. Agape love is the kind of love Christians strive to display towards all people, even our enemies. Agape love is the kind of love Jesus was talking about. Reading the passages in the New Testament, pretty much anywhere the word love appears, it’s talking about agape.

Agape love is Christian love. And it’s not just a state of being. Agape love is a directive for action. Feelings may be fleeting, but the obligations of agape do not change. It’s a function of will, don’t you see, not a function of what we feel like doing.

A vision of community. A vision of selflessness. A vision of God.

Faith. Hope. Love.

But it doesn't end there. It's not just about a great triumvirate, a holy trinity of Faith, and Hope, and Love, as wonderful as that sounds. "Faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." It's about the greatest of these. In the end, it's about love.

Faith, our faith in God, our faith that nothing is greater or more powerful, our reformed belief in the all-encompassing sovereignty of God – it all starts and ends with God.

God's love for us is so great, that through God's grace we are given faith. Faith in God's everlasting and eternal and unconditional love. Faith that God loves us no matter what we do. Faith that God draws us close, in life and in death. Faith that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

And when people speak of finding Jesus – "Have you found Jesus yet?" – we know that it's actually the other way around. Jesus found them. Jesus finds us.

Faith, our faith, then, every element of, and even the very existence of our faith, is inextricably tied to love. Faith exists, faith is sustained, faith abides, all because of God's love for us.

So when it comes down to faith and love, both essential, love is greater.

And as you might expect, the same holds true for hope, as well. I suppose what keeps hope from turning into a self-centered Santa-like grocery list of what we want from God, and what prevents us from hoping merely for a better home, a better job, a better salary, a better life, is the outward-directed focus that love imposes. As Christians, we hope for and pray for those who hunger, for those who grieve, for those who suffer. We hope for, we long for, a world where God's love is present in everything and everywhere. A world where God's intention for creation is fulfilled.

Hope, too, for the Christian, is colored by, defined by, inspired by, the greatest of these, love.

"Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." With those three at the core of our personal philosophy, isn't it hard to imagine responding in a way other than with gratitude, and with joy, to God's reaching out to us? If that's what being a Christian is about, if that's what's required to join this great First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, they'll be crowding in off the streets. And they are. Go ahead, sign me up!

Don't you see, it's not about dogma, or doctrine, or a political agenda. It's not about conservative or liberal theology, or about being one of the chosen elect. It's not even about who gets to heaven and who doesn't.

Listen again, and keep it close to your heart, close to your soul. At every funeral, and every wedding, and when it comes up in the Sunday lectionary reading – listen.

Love is patient and kind. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

You'll never forget why you call yourself a Christian, or wonder what God is calling us to do, and to be. You'll have an answer to the question why you sit here in these uncomfortable pews on a glorious spring morning such as this one.

“Faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

AMEN.

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¹ Jon Meacham, “The Decline and Fall of Christian America,” Newsweek, April 13, 2009.

² Jack Haberer, God Views, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

³ Robert Trawick, “Reformed Use of Scripture,” Presbyterian Outlook, April 13, 2009.

⁴ Jon Walton, “The One Lingering Question,” Austin Seminary Insights, Fall 2007.