

Message for January 30, 2022

1 Corinthians 13

A minister and a cattle rancher were standing in a field miles away from anywhere. It was late in the evening and the two men were talking about life when the minister glanced up and noticed the twinkling stars spread across the night sky. Inspired by the sight, the minister asked, "Sandy, do you believe in God?" After a moment's hesitation, Sandy said that he did, but the way he said it invited another question. "What kind of God do you believe in?" This time the silence lasted a little longer but finally Sandy sadly replied, "You ask me what kind of God I believe in? I'll tell you. He is as far away and as silent as those stars."

What do we believe God is like? This may seem to be a theoretical question far removed from our day to day lives, but it really isn't. It isn't because our answer reflects and perhaps even determines our very outlook on life itself. If we believe that God is a warm and caring being who is really interested in us, then our lives will reflect this. If however we believe that God is harsh, judgmental, and is as silent and remote as the stars in the night sky, then our lives will reflect this too. What do we believe God is like? What is the nature of God? While it may not be obvious at first, today's scripture passage tells us.

Today's scripture passage is one of the best known and best loved passages of the entire Bible. In wonderful words that will surely last forever, Paul described love and its nature. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."

As no one else ever has, Paul describes what love is like. As I thought about this it occurred to me that in this passage Paul does not only describe what love is like, whether he intended to or not he also describes what God is like. After all, as St. John wrote, "God is love". Since God is love it follows that what Paul wrote describes God himself. Consider what Paul wrote about love, only this time substituting the word God for love.

God is patient, God is kind, God does not envy, God does not boast, God is not proud. God is not rude, God is not self seeking, God is not easily angered, God keeps no record of wrong. God does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. God always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. God never fails.

This is a marvelous description of what God is like. Perhaps Paul didn't consciously set out to describe the divine nature when he wrote today's scripture passage, but he most certainly did so. And because God is love, that characterizes how he relates to us. He chooses to love us. To use an analogy, God relates to us as any good parent relates to his or her child. I like the way a devotion in the magazine "These Days" once put it.

"When a child is born the parents will provide for all its necessities and wants. Routinely they will do for the 'bundle of joy' what they would ordinarily do for no other. They will remove smelly, messy diapers and will stumble out of bed in the middle of the night to nurse or to prepare formula so that this child can be fed.

Has this newborn done anything to deserve the care that he or she receives? The baby has done nothing to deserve the care that is received!

Why then do the parents do all they do for this child? They provide for the little one simply because they freely chose to give their love to this new life. The child experiences grace!"

As a good parent chooses to love his or her child, so too has God chosen to love us; he has simply because of who and what he is and who and what we are, his beloved children. But while Paul may not have been consciously describing what God is like in today's passage, he was most certainly describing what we, the children of God and the followers of Christ, ought to be like.

The Christian church in Corinth was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, one of the most dysfunctional congregations in the history of Christianity. The members of the congregation for example argued about food, and more specifically about meat. The only easily available source of meat came from the animals sacrificed in the pagan temples. Some in the congregation refused to

buy and eat this meat, saying that doing so meant that they were supporting the pagans which was nothing less than a betrayal of Christ! Others though didn't hesitate to buy the meat and eat it reasoning that the pagan gods weren't real and besides, where was it written that a person had to be a vegetarian in order to be a Christian? They also argued about the nature of marriage and sexual morality and if all this wasn't enough, there was also what went on at their communion services.

In the days of the early church communion was an actual meal where everyone contributed whatever they could; it was something like one of our pot-luck dinners. Some people in the congregation however refused to share what they brought, and the result was that some people gorged while others went hungry. In those days people also drank wine at every meal and that included communion, but what happened? Some people drank far too much and became riotously drunk! This was the sad state of affairs in that congregation and it was Paul's task to try and straighten things out. And what did he tell them? That no matter what, they were to love one another; love is the key and if the Corinthians could not or would not love one another then it didn't matter how 'religious' or 'spiritual' they were. As Paul told them:

“If I speak in the tongues of men and angels but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or cymbal. If I have the gift of prophesy and can fathom all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

According to Paul, if the members of the congregation refused to love one another then their religion was in vain, and it didn't even matter if they were willing to become martyrs for the sake of their faith. Whether they wanted to hear it or not, Paul told the Corinthians that they were, spiritually speaking, children. It was now however time for them to grow up and act like adults. As he said:

“When I was a child I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man I put childish ways behind me”.

In conclusion, Paul insisted that love is the key simply because ultimately only the love will last. As he said in this famous line:

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

Now as wonderful as this passage is, there isn't anything particularly new or revolutionary in Paul's emphasis on love; in fact he was just following in the footsteps of Jesus. We can think of Jesus' reply for example when he was asked what religion and ultimately what life itself are all about:

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

We can also remember what Jesus said on the night of the Last Supper:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you”.

More than anything else we, the people of God and the disciples of Christ, are called to love, and if we don't then none of the rest really matters. And it is also crucially important for us to realize that love, as both Jesus and Paul understood it, is more than a feeling. Rather love, as the Bible understands it, is a choice and an act of will. We can choose to love just as we can choose to hate but as we all know full well, our choice to love is not always an easy one. Indeed if we are honest about it we have to admit that sometimes it really goes against the grain to be loving, patient and kind, and to not be rude or easily angered.

It was back in the 1960's and while traveling on a plane, a young professor happened to find himself sitting beside the famed civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr. The two men struck up a conversation and the professor spoke about how involved he was in the civil rights movement on the campus where he worked. He enjoyed the work and believed in it but his involvement had estranged him from his father. He said that his father was good and well-meaning but, and there was no way of getting around it, he was a racist. He thoroughly disapproved of what his son was doing and was very vocal about it.

King's response was to say: “Your father is doing the best he can. He has not had your educational opportunities, opportunities which your father has provided for you. As a Christian you must be patient with him and love him.”

In short said King, the young man had to *choose* to love his father despite the put downs, the racist comments and all the rest. And King, like Paul before him, was on to something. Christian love does not always approve, and it doesn't always come easily either. To love in fact can be hard work but in the end love, as Jesus, Paul and Martin Luther King Jr. understood it, is a choice

that we make every single day. We choose to love just as God is love and has chosen to love us.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, as hard as it may be to believe, the first month of this year is almost past. As this month draws to its close, we thank you for all of the good that we have and have experienced. We thank you for the dazzling brightness of the snow and the cold, crisp temperatures. We thank you too for everything that enables us to live in what is sometimes a harsh and forbidding climate. Thanks be to you for our warm homes, the clothes that keep us warm, and the food that nourishes us.

As we give you thanks, we pray for everyone for whom this time of year is more than an inconvenience but even a threat to life itself. We pray for those who are homeless, those who lack warm clothes and those without enough food to eat.

We thank you this day for the many ways in which love comes into our lives, through our families and friends. We thank you that you are a god of love, and help us we pray, to love others and the world around us as you do. Help us to love, even as we are loved remembering that love is more than a feeling, that it is a choice and act of will.

We pray this day for all who, for whatever reason, feel unloved or even unlovable. We pray for all those who are lonely and especially for those struggling with feelings of isolation as the pandemic seems to endlessly drag on. We pray for healing in the lives of those who are ill and, as the death toll continues to rise, all who mourn as well.

We thank you for this land in which we live with its peace and stability, remembering all the places where there is so little. As we have in recent weeks, we once again offer up our prayer for peace as the tensions between Russian and the West continue to rise, now not only just over Ukraine but elsewhere as well. Grant that we may remember the lessons of the past and we pray that

cooler heads may prevail. Grant that truly your will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen