

# WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/OCTOBER 4, 2009

## CHURCH MATTERS: COMMUNITY/I CORINTHIANS 13

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### I. THE TEXT

We continue this morning considering “church matters” – things that matter in the church, aspects of our life together that make the church different from the Rotary or Assistance League. Two Sundays ago we considered worship – we come week in and week out, not as spectators of a show but as the doers of worship. Last week we reflected on the church matter called “godliness” – we are those committed to remaining intentional about who we are becoming, about the pursuit of a transformative faith. This morning’s “church matter” is community – the nature of the relationships that characterize the people of God.

Jesus said to his disciples shortly before his death, “A new commandment I give you – that you love one another.” Perhaps the most eloquent description of the sort of love Jesus had in mind was penned by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 13 – a text you’ve probably heard at almost every wedding you’ve ever attended, but in the context of Paul’s letter, a text framed by his concerns with the Lord’s Supper, and the quality of life together. Hear the word of God...

*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. <sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> 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.*

*<sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup> but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup> And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

**II. PRAYER:** O God, be in our minds and in our hearts, in our being and in our doing, in our listening and in our speaking. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, for you alone are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

### III. THE UGLY SIDE OF CHURCH

What you read about the church in the newspaper these days is rarely pretty. Sensational headlines about sexual impropriety, financial mismanagement, brutal arguments over homosexuality, abortion, women in ministry – you name it, we in the church have probably done battle over it somewhere. When we disagree passionately in the Protestant Church we simply create new denominations – the Episcopalian church is in the process of a split as we speak. We Presbyterians threaten to splinter every other year when the General Assembly meets. There are currently conversations in our own presbytery about creating a presbytery within a presbytery, dividing the presbytery so that those who disagree with one another on the matter of homosexuality can have separate Presbytery meetings. A far cry from Jesus' command to love one another – we Protestants fuss and feud and fight... and then we split. Too many denominations to even keep track of ... nearly all of them the result of an argument. And all of them celebrating the Lord’s Supper, the meal of unity.

We hear the words of Jesus, “they will know you are my disciples by your love for one another.” Ouch. No, the church has not always been the best advertisement for the Christian faith. Maybe God made a mistake with this “entrust-Christianity-to-the-disciples” plan.

#### IV. A BETTER WAY

While I Corinthians 13 is indeed well-suited to the romantic, tender setting of a wedding, the real story is that a wedding was the farthest thing from Paul’s mind when he wrote those beautiful words. Paul wrote this eloquent essay to the church in Corinth – a church in trouble. The Corinthian church members were at each other’s throats, arguing over just about everything imaginable – which pastor they liked best, which of its member’s gifts were superior, whose theology was the most accurate. Their worship was as chaotic as a modern-day town-hall meeting. The tension on the patio over cookies and punch was thick. The Apostle Paul did not coin the saying, but I imagine he would agree with it: “The Church is like Noah’s ark – it’s only because of the storm outside that you can stand the smell inside.”

It is into this messy situation that Paul writes – to remind them of God’s call to true community, to an *uncommon love*. Let me show you another way, says Paul – a way both different and better. His words, lovely as they are, were not intended for the inside of a sentimental Hallmark card or a beautiful cross-stitched wall hanging – no, Paul intended them to be a wake-up call to a church off track, a reminder of what truly matters, a challenge to live up to. “Just hold on a minute people of God,” says Paul. “It’s about your relationships... it is about creating a community characterized by love.

Love is patient, kind.

Love is not arrogant or rude.

Love doesn’t strut or keep score.

Love isn’t “me first,” it is “you first.”

Love doesn’t have to be right, it always assumes the best.

In the church, we do things differently, says Paul... it is first, and above all, and simply, about love. Our worship may be the best show in town, but if we love poorly we’re wasting our time. Our theology might be tight as the proverbial drum, but if we are shredding one another we may as well shutter the doors. In the words of Teresa of Avila “. . .the Lord does not look so much at the magnitude of anything we do as at the love with which we do it.”

[*Interior Castle*] No matter what we say or believe or do, without love we not only fail at being church; we cease to be church. What sets the church apart is our relationships – our ability to invest in caring and compassionate ways in each other’s lives. The degree to which our arms expand to include the newcomer, the manner in which we come alongside the hurting, our ability to love through and beyond our disagreements, to support and be supported, to encourage and be encouraged – that’s what makes a church a church. And when the church is the church, when we make the love of Christ real and tangible for one another we set the stage for goodness to push into the world’s darkness; for souls wounded by the world’s harshness to be healed; for the fabric of torn communities to be mended by grace.

The church is truly the church when we live out Christ’s call to an uncommon, person-to-person, tenacious love. It does not have to be perfect, but it must be our aim.

#### V. LAKE CARTHAGE

A number of years ago in a worship service at the Presbyterian Church’s bi-annual General Assembly where, as is our custom, we were arguing angrily over this and that, I heard Michael Lindvall, pastor, author and storyteller, tell this tale. The story was subsequently published in his book entitled *Leaving North Haven*.

It is a piece called “Our Organist,” a story about a guest supply preacher for a little church in Carthage Lake, a mythical little shriveling town on the way down and out. The Carthage Lake

church hasn't had a minister of its own since 1939. But a handful of people hold on and gather one Sunday a month, at noon, for Sunday school and worship with whatever preacher they can convince to make the drive to Carthage Lake... Michael has agreed to go. The clerk of the congregation, Lloyd Larson, tells him that there are only **eleven** members, but they'll all be there. And he promised an organist, the same organist Carthage Lake has been promising guest preachers for 60 years, Lloyd Larson's sister-in-law, Agnes Rigstad. Yes, Michael would be this month's guest preacher.

The Sunday of his guest appearance arrived and Michael describes the scene of the small white frame building with its large sentimental stained glass windows of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, lamb in one arm, staff in the other, and Jesus praying alone in the Garden of Gethsemane. Upon his arrival there were two cars and a pick-up truck parked out front.

Inside, their eleven-member congregation had swelled to twelve worshipers, a young man had joined the others, all scattered throughout the sanctuary, sitting in their customary pews. Lloyd Larson explained that there was no bulletin, that the preacher should just announce the hymns. Michael nodded to organist Agnes, with her wig slightly askew... Agnes responded with a broad smile.

Worship began. Michael announced the opening hymn, number 204, "*Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart.*" Agnes smiled at him and played, "*What a Friend We Have in Jesus.*" The eleven elderly members sang by memory. Only the young man used a hymnal.

Following the sermon, Michael announced the next hymn, "*Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.*" He looked directly at Agnes, who smiled back and played, "*I Love to Tell the Story.*"

After the prayers and offering, Michael walked over to the organ bench, bent down, and whispered, "Agnes, what are we going to sing?" She smiled and began to play, "*Just as I Am, without One Plea.*"

After worship, Agnes shook his hand but didn't say a word. Lloyd sheepishly explained, "Forgot to tell you about Agnes... You don't need to tell us *what* the hymn is, only *when*. Agnes only knows those three hymns, so we always sing 'em."

"Good grief, Lloyd, you mean to tell me you've been singing the same three hymns for 60 years?" Lloyd was concentrating on the frayed sanctuary carpet. "We like those hymns well enough, and we know 'em by heart... and she's our organist."

Later, Michael met the young man, Neil Larson, Lloyd Larson's grandson, who explained, "Agnes is my late grandmother's little sister, Lloyd's wife's baby sister. Agnes has never been quite right. She never says more than a few words... but she learned to play those hymns in one week 60 years ago when the regular organist got sick. It was a musical emergency. Anyway, she hasn't been able to learn one since. Playing the organ this one Sunday a month means the world to her. Sometimes I think it's mostly for her that they keep the Carthage Lake church open. Aunt Agnes lives for the first Sunday of the month."

*[Let's step out of the story for a moment – it seems there in Carthage Lake they'd taken the Apostle Paul's words to heart. Love puts up with anything, always looks for the best, cares more for others than for itself. Jesus' words too – they will know you are my disciples, not by the size of your congregation or the quality of your music, but by the quality of your love.]*

Meanwhile, back at Carthage Lake...

After worship, having greeted the eleven members including Lloyd Larson and his sister-in-law Agnes, the organist, the lone young man, Neil, lingered on.

"Aunt Agnes lives for the first Sunday of the month," he said. "Sometimes I think it's mostly for her that they keep the church open."

"They asked me to play, of course," the young man went on. "They had to ask. But grandpa knew I'd say no. I remember how he sighed with relief when I said no. Then he slapped me on the back."

"You're an organist?" the preacher asked.

“Eastman School of Music class of ’84. I’ve had some big church jobs, the last one down in Texas, big church... brand new organ, 102 ranks. Four services a Sunday. Then I got sick. I’ve been HIV positive for six years. The Personnel Committee of the church figured it out, the weight loss, all the sick days, not married. They told me it would be best if I moved on, but not till after Christmas, of course. My parents live in St. Paul, but my father and I haven’t spoken since I was 19... I’m not sick enough to be in the hospital, just too tired most of the time. I really had nowhere to go. My grandfather said I could move in with him and Agnes. To tell the truth, I feel right at home here in a town of 80-year-olds.”

He paused and went on, “**They keep Agnes and they took me in.** And since I moved up here, most every night Lloyd or old man Engstrom from down the road opens up the church for me. If it’s cold, they lay a fire in the wood stove. And then I play the organ. It’s a sweet little instrument, believe it or not. Lloyd’s kept it up.

“These last weeks it’s been almost warm in the evenings, so they leave the doors and windows of the church open and everybody sits out on their front porch and they listen to me play – Bach, Buxtehude, Widor, all the stuff I love. And they clap from their porches, even Agnes claps.”<sup>i</sup>

## VI. OUR LOVE

And when I hear that story I hear heaven clapping. They will know you are my disciples by the way you love. True, the church is not always the best advertisement for the Christian faith. But it is also true that for every story of clergy misconduct that hits the newspapers there are thousands of clergy serving their churches with integrity and faithfulness. For every denominational split that makes the headlines there are thousands of churches large and small that just keep on loving. For every person that storms out of church in a huff there are countless others who work through their differences and make God’s promises look like they just might be true.

Just take a look at our patio, as people who agree and disagree on matters theological, on committee decisions, on politics and sports greet each other with genuine affection, get caught up on the week, reflect on the music – people whose paths would, without the church, probably never have crossed, but now have meals together, go to the Hollywood bowl together, pray for and with one another, dig into books together. As Paul wrote, as Jesus said: it is about our relationships – a community that is toward one another the way Christ has been toward us. “No greater love than this, (than) to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”... the very thing we celebrate this morning as we come to the table of our Lord. It is all about love... uncommon love. We are the church: it is what we do.

**Amen and amen.**

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<sup>i</sup> An adaptation of Michael Lindvall’s chapter *Our Organist*, in his book entitled *Leaving North Haven*, page 144.