

Sermon
January 30 & 31, 2010
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Good morning, everyone. I want to do a touch of Bible this morning, if that's okay...

We all know that the Apostle Paul wrote letters to churches. He wrote to the church in Rome, for example; and to the church in Philippi; and the church in Galatia; and to churches in other places. The church he wrote to the most was the church in Corinth.

Now it's my impression that Paul had a special place in his heart for the Corinthian church. You see, read the story in Acts and what we learn is that Paul goes to Corinth after his greatest failure as a missionary. He had gone to Athens—incidentally, the only place he does his missionary work completely by himself; none of his friends like Timothy and Silas are with him in Athens—and preached there, but no one had taken him very seriously. Elsewhere he had been listened to, and even opposed. But in Athens, they mostly just thought he was interesting.

So his mission in Athens was, for the most part, a failure. Afterwards—quite dejected, I suppose—he went to Corinth. He made friends there—a woman and man named Priscilla and Aquila—and they gave him a job as a tentmaker. And slowly—I guess with his two new friends—he made more friends, and formed a community of believers. And the Corinthians, in turn, helped him get back on his feet. He stayed there eighteen months...the longest he stayed in any city on his missionary journeys. I think he stayed there that long because it took him that long to rest and recover after his disappointment in Athens.

When he left, he and the Corinthians stayed in touch through letters and messengers. We know from this letter we read in worship this morning that friends of a woman named Chloe had come to visit Paul with news of the Corinthian church. We also know that he had a letter from the Corinthian church filled with information about their life and questions about how to be the church.

From what Paul writes in this letter, we can deduce that all is not well in the Corinthian church. Here are some things that are going on:

- There are factions in the Corinthian church;
- Paul, himself, has become something of an issue. It seems that some respect his teaching, and others do not, and that on some level they are arguing about his authority as an apostle.
- The Corinthians appear to understand themselves as being more spiritually mature than they really were. They boast of their knowledge and sophistication, but at the same time we know they're having significant problems. For example...
 - They're engaging in immoral sexual behavior that, in Paul's words, would make the pagans blush;
 - Instead of working out their own problems, they're taking one another to the civil court;
 - The wealthy are taking advantage of the poor;
 - They're following a "do your own thing" pattern of life. They misunderstand the freedom given by the gospel, and have decided it means that they can do whatever they want, even if it does damage to the faith of their brother or sister; even if it does damage to the life of the community. They are stuck in the language of personal right: "I have a right to do this or that..." To paraphrase Paul, he

responds by saying “You may have a right to this or that, but that doesn’t mean you should exercise it.”

- Their worship is disorderly;
- There are those in the community who, because they speak in ecstatic language—tongues—are looking down their noses at others in the community. And overall, it seems the Corinthians are more interested in appearances than substance. They seem to think of the path of discipleship as a lifestyle rather than a way of life.
- And finally, some are even denying the resurrection of Christ.

So what Paul does in this letter is teach them...and where it is that their understanding is not merely mistaken, but actually harmful, he admonishes them. He teaches them about what it means to be the people of God; how we are to be as the Church. “No, you can’t sleep around,” he tells us. “Stop taking one another to court. There’s got to be someone in your community wise enough to mediate your conflicts.” “Yes, you are free; but beware that the exercise of your freedom does not weaken the faith of your neighbor.” “Make sure your worship is done decently and in good order so that it is welcoming to the stranger.” “Remember, you are not like everybody else. You are the people claimed by Christ.”

And while it is that some of his teaching is so specific to the Corinthians that it takes some disciplined study and reflection to connect it to our lives, some of what he writes is immediately accessible and eternal in its beauty. Like what we heard today...I Corinthians 13, the poetic apogee of his letter to his friends, and his own reflection on what it means to love one another as Christ loves us.

Now if you’ve noticed, it snowed this weekend. If you’ve been around Richmond long enough...which happens to be about twenty-four hours...you’ve discovered that the beauty of snow around here is that pretty much everything stops.

We were supposed to hold an annual meeting today. But we’re not...because of the snow.

And there’s no Sunday School or nursery care today because it’s just too hard to get out and get around right now.

We did have a wedding yesterday afternoon. About a quarter of the guests made it, and because of the snow they had to move the reception at the last minute. But it didn’t really matter, of course...the ones who needed to be there—in particular, the bride and groom—were; and they got married. Instead of it being any kind of stilted affair, everybody was pretty much relaxed. With twelve inches of snow on the ground, it didn’t matter that the wedding was perfect...just that it got done. Just for *anybody* to be there was enough...

The beauty of snow around here is that it simplifies our life. All the things we think have to get done right now we discover don’t have to get done right now; and in a way, we get back to basics for just a bit. After all, when the snow comes we don’t run to the grocery store to stock up on Fritos and cheese dip; but on milk and bread. At least, that’s what we always say we’re buying...

That’s a long-winded way of saying that there were a bunch of other things I was going to say in this message...lots of stuff related to an annual meeting...about our past and our future. They are things worth saying at the right time.

But today, it seemed more important to stick to the basics and keep it simple. We are Christ Church. It is the Lord who has created us. The word “church” is a transliteration of a Greek word “Kyrios,” which means Lord. We are the ones who belong to the Lord. And what the Lord does is create a people, a people who receive their identity not from the world that

surrounds us but from Jesus who calls us. We are called to care for one another the way a people does, but we are also called to go into the world because the world still needs saving, and that includes Short Pump. We were not given new life to hoard it. We were given new life to share it. We are to remember that “go” is one of God’s favorite words. God says “go” to Abraham; to Moses; to Ruth; to Jonah; to Peter; to Paul; and to us...and that’s just a start.

So when it is that Paul wants to put an exclamation point on his description of what the life we’ve been given looks like; of what it means to be the people of God gathered and sent...his basic instruction is that we’re supposed to love; that we’re supposed to do it. Not storge love—which is the good kind of love that binds together children and parents; not philia love—which is the good kind of love that creates friendship around shared experiences and interests; not eros love—which is the kind of love that *can* be good if it is directed properly, but can also be disastrous if it is not. But agape love—self-giving, self-offering; sacrificial love which is an action, not a feeling; which is to will and work for the well-being of another; which can be given to anyone, at any time. And what he’s saying is that that’s what matters most.

Now people write all sorts of books about love...about what it is and what it’s not...and some of them are worth reading. Here’s what Paul says: “If it demonstrates patience; if it demonstrates kindness; if it takes pleasure in the successes of others; if it manifests humility; if it allows others to win the argument; if it is understanding; if it allows others to be who they are; if it takes pleasure in what is right and true; if it is forbearing, trusting, hopeful; and enduring...then there’s a good chance that it’s love.”

So go ahead and do it, he teaches us. You may get it right, and you may get it wrong; you may experience a reward, you may not. Following the path of love is not as easy as following a list of rules; but it’s a fiction that the way of Christ is easy. And while it may be that there are things we learn by studying them, there are some things we can only understand by doing them...and love is one of them. And as it always is, do it enough and it becomes who we are. And if there are some things we can teach others through our words—like algebra, or how to set up our computer--there are some things we can teach and reveal only through our behavior...like what the Apostle writes about to the Corinthians.

For a snowy Sunday, that may be enough...probably, considering the beauty of this passage...it’s too much. But may it be that the rest of this day we keep our eyes open because there’ll probably be a chance to do what the Apostle teaches us to do. It probably won’t be something very fancy. But with twelve inches of snow on the ground, fancy doesn’t mean much. What matters are the basics.

Like loving one another as Christ loves us.