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Just Another Silly Love Song

I Corinthians 13:4-7

As the 23rd psalm is the most popular scripture requested to be read at funerals, so is 1st Corinthians 13 the most read passage at weddings. So much so that some engaged couples who've attended many of their friends' weddings will ask if they can use something else. Paul McCartney wrote a song called *Just Another Silly Love Song* and perhaps part of the reason couples want different passages to convey the depth and breadth of love is because oft repeated words and songs can lose impact and meaning. Sometimes they can even move into the psychological realm of being "silly."

McCartney's song begins with *"You'd think that people would have had enough of silly love songs, but I look around me and I see it isn't so."* Well, for the most part, if we think that the overuse of 1st Corinthians 13 has lessened its power and reach; *"I look around me and I see it isn't so."* On this weekend before Valentine's Day I want us to take another look at a description of love that is not only the most popular from all the love related passages in the bible, but among the most popular in all literature.

We heard the complete passage written by the Apostle Paul earlier in the service. Once again, here is how he sums things up: *"And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."* I was thinking if this is true--not faith, not hope, the "greatest" is love--then maybe the church and its people need a shift of focus. If we want, for example, to grow our faith, if we want to be filled with a strong sense of hope about our lives and where we are going, if we want to tap into the deepest spiritual waters, then we need to spend more time learning how to love. Maybe the main highway to God isn't paved with the stones of faith; it's paved with the stones of love.

Biblical scholars always seem to chastise preachers for their broad use of the term. Broad in the sense that in the Greek Paul used there were three different words used to describe the three different kinds of love. There is romantic love, neighborly love, and Godly love. The English language rolls them all into one. The scholar would insist we take into account the particular word for love Paul used in Greek. The King James Version uses "Charity" or emphasizes brotherly or neighborly love which might not make it appropriate for weddings after all. A bride and groom may be taken aback with the meaning, "I love you like a brother or sister!"

But there are some ancient manuscripts of Paul's letter that also use the Greek term for "love toward God" which means that we really don't know which meaning Paul

intended to use. Because of that, my point has always been that the broad English word love that is used to identify all three is probably the most appropriate. Here is the heart of the passage. *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* O.K. in romance, with our neighbor, in relationship to God.

Maybe Paul was onto something when he said, *“faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love.”* If we want to grow our faith, to be filled with a strong sense of hope about our lives and where we are going and tap into the deepest spiritual waters, perhaps we need to spend more time learning how to love.

I wonder, for instance, if this would go a long way toward eradicating some of the biggest problems we encounter today. How might a more aggressive pursuit of love have affected the furor over the printing of a cartoon about the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper? You may know the story of how Flemming Rose, the paper’s cultural editor wanted to determine if the art world was self-censoring out of fear of Islamic radicals. He asked the cartoonists from 25 Danish newspapers to draw Muhammad from their point of view. Rose received twelve responses and his newspaper printed them all including one depicting the Prophet with a bomb in his turban. The Muslim community was outraged and all heck broke loose with the violence mounting every day since. Amazingly, to appease his critics his paper intends to publish in today’s edition a full page of cartoons lampooning Jesus and the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

The Bible isn’t the only holy book encouraging the pursuit of love; we can find this in the Koran as well. *“Keep to forgiveness and enjoin love,”* it says. (7:199) In the desire to walk the path of God, in both Christian and Muslim teachings “the greatest of these is love” approach might have prevented the whole episode from happening in the first place. From Corinthians taking to heart *“love is not rude”* and *“it does not rejoice in wrongdoing,”* may have had the power to overcome the temptation to even initially invite people to draw their interpretations of Muhammad. And from the Koran, taking to heart *“Keep to forgiveness and enjoin love,”* may have helped to dissipate so much of the anger that came as a result.

Down toward the personal level of our lives another big problem we encounter today that may be relieved by talking “the greatest of these is love” idea is stress. Evidently neuroscientists have been studying how human touch affects the neural response to threatening situations. The findings suggest that married women under extreme stress who hold their husbands’ hand feel immediate relief. To determine this, scientists at the University of Wisconsin working with 16 couples asked the women to lie in an MRI scanning machine knowing they would periodically receive a mild electric shock. This made them apprehensive and the scan showed high brain activity in regions involved

with negative emotions and the anticipation of pain. But the moment they felt their husbands' hand reaching into the machine, the activity level in these regions plunged in every woman.

They also found that this same reaction happened with a stranger's hand. It makes me think of the woman with the lifelong malady who reaches out to touch Jesus. "If only I can touch the hem of his robe I will be healed," she says. Jesus knew before any neuroscientist of the healing, calming power of touch. It might not be so farfetched to think that a richer life and a deeper faith involve as much hand holding as praying. I visited one of our members this week who is in the St. Vincent hospice. Before I left I said a prayer and when finished he was holding onto my hand so firmly that I just sat on the edge of the bed. With tears in her eyes his daughter said, "This is the calmest he's been all day." Sometimes we need to do more handholding than praying.

Another big challenge we face today that a "the greatest of these is love" approach can help is the one sided aspect of our relationships. Whether in our personal relationships or relationship with God there can be a lop sided dynamic that is frustrating. More than faith or hope, perhaps love is the piece that can move us toward action, understanding and acceptance.

I've never thought that people have different levels of capacity when it comes to an ability to love but they do have different levels of expression and that's what can bring on the trouble. A lower level of expression can be interpreted as a lack of love.

The comparison game can do more damage than good. Early in my ministry there was a member of the church I was serving who owned a moving company. Every few months he would let the church pick up damaged or worn out packing boxes to take to a recycling center as a fundraiser. One Saturday a crew of members with a borrowed flatbed truck arrived at the warehouse to pick up the boxes. The owner was waiting impatiently because he had a breakfast appointment. As the crew started loading he began yelling at them to hurry up and then, exasperated, told them all to get out of the way, fired up a forklift and began to do it himself all the while ranting how he gave and gave to the church but never got anything back in return. Dumbfounded, the crew went on their way to the recycling center and noticed I was at the church, so they stopped to explain what had happened. I told them to turn the truck around and joining them we drove back to the warehouse. The owner/church member had already left so I told everybody to unload and pile all the boxes back where we found them.

In retrospect it was a foolish, immature thing to do, for that family left the church and refused to talk to me from that point on. I should have parked the truck in the church parking lot and called him later that afternoon asking if I could come over to talk and listen to his concerns. In the comparison game what he saw as a lower expression of love and care was interpreted as a lack of love.

Thank goodness God doesn't handle things the way I or the man did. What was it Paul said, *"love is not irritable or resentful?"* Most of us have probably had moments when we've felt of God that we give and give but get nothing back in return. From God's side there is never a parting of the way, for as Paul says *"love hopes all things, endures all things, love never ends."* Again, a "greatest of these is love" approach may help to avoid those thoughts and episodes.

Paul had a vision of what our world, lives, and relationship to God could look like if we took a "the greatest of these is love" stance. It might be a vision worthy of our consideration.

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