

“Love is.....”

(The spiritual gift of teaching)

Feb. 12, 2017

I Corinthians 13:1-8a

Well, this Tuesday is Valentine’s Day, in case you didn’t know that yet, and you need to get on the ball and do something! It is a time of year when we think about our relationships, and about the subject of love. We also are currently doing a sermon series in our church on the spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to followers of Jesus, and this morning we want to talk about the spiritual gift of teaching. Now some people have the natural gift of teaching—they have the ability to teach math or history or Spanish in a way that people can remember the key facts and understand them. Who were your favorite teachers growing up who did that for you, or who is your favorite teacher right now? Mrs. Rowell, my English teacher my junior year in high school was my favorite, as she had a gift of making that subject become real. A good teacher makes such a difference in people’s lives!

But sometimes, teachers go beyond just teaching material well, and to explain what I mean let me tell you the story of Lee Buono, who as a middle school student stayed after school one day as part of a science project to remove the brain and the spinal cord from a frog. He did such a good job that his science teacher, Mr. Al Siedlecki from Medford Memorial Middle School in Medford, New Jersey, told him he should think about becoming a neurosurgeon someday, and encouraged him in this way throughout the year. And that’s exactly what Buono ended up doing. Years later, after he did yet another successful surgery, a patient suggested that Dr. Buono call his former teacher who had inspired him and thank him. So Buono did. Siedlecki hadn’t heard from Buono since he was in high school. “I want to thank you,” Buono told him. “I was flabbergasted,” Siedlecki remembers. I said, ‘Of all the people in your entire career, you want to thank me?’ It was the same feeling I had when...my kids were born.” Siedlecki continued, “I started to cry. It made me feel really important that I had that influence.” Lately, Siedlecki admits, “I almost am afraid to say that I ‘m a teacher to some people.” Not anymore, he told Buono, ‘Because you called me...I’m going to help as many people as I can to find their passion too.” A good teacher can make such a difference in people’s lives, and in ways that go beyond just the teaching of the subject matter.

And among followers of Jesus, there are some who are given the spiritual gift of teaching. Now as we have talked about, a spiritual gift is a supernatural, God-given ability to perform a ministry for the building up of the body of Christ. It is given graciously by God and cannot be earned, and different gifts are given to different people. Those who have the spiritual gift of teaching have a unique ability to share the truths of the Bible, not just as a book of literature but as a book of faith. And there are times when God uses their teaching to change people’s lives in direct and powerful ways. It is not just teaching that encourages people to remember material, but teaching that seeks to open your lives to the joy and hope of a life of discipleship to Jesus. Can you think of anyone who has been a spiritual teacher in your life, who may have had this spiritual gift of teaching? We celebrate people with that gift today!

Certainly St. Paul was someone who was given the spiritual gift of teaching. Our Bible is full of stories about the times he taught people, and taught them in such a way about Jesus that their lives were

transformed in powerful ways, ways that ended up changing the entire world. The Holy Spirit filled him with the gift of talking about Jesus in all kinds of different cultural settings, both Jewish and Greek, and finding illustrations and stories that would connect with his audience.

Paul not only taught about Jesus to people, he also taught followers of Jesus about how to live together, and that is what he was primarily doing in the passage from I Corinthians we heard read today. These famous words about love are read more often than anything else at weddings, and yet ironically, Paul was not primarily writing these words for people in romantic relationships, but for people in the church. He had just been talking about spiritual gifts to the Corinthian Christians in the chapter before, and he knew that the Corinthian church had all kinds of really faithful people, who were using their spiritual gifts in powerful ways. But some of them saw themselves as so spiritually superior, because of how God was using their gift within them, that they were complaining about how they didn't want to associate with other people in the church because they were not spiritual enough. The people in that church remind me of an old Peanuts cartoon where Lucy is jumping rope with her brother Linus behind her, and she says to him "You a doctor! Ha! That's a big laugh!" In the next box she turns to him and says "You could never be a doctor! You know why?" And in the next box she walks away saying "Because you don't love humanity, that's why!" In the final box, Linus yells back at her, "I love humanity...it's people I can't stand!" That was the problem with this Corinthian church-many of those who saw themselves as being most spiritual, as having the greatest spiritual gifts, were all in favor of using their gifts for God's humanity in the world-it was just the people of their own church they couldn't stand!

So this is why Paul says to them and to us that the point of spiritual gifts is to not to boast about whatever gift the Holy Spirit may have given you, but to use that gift in love, which is the greatest gift of all and the more excellent way. He says to them that if you have the spiritual gift of tongues for instance and can speak in the tongues of angels, but if you don't have love, you are just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if you have the spiritual gift of prophecy, great enough to understand all mysteries, and have the spiritual gift of faith, strong enough to move mountains, but if you don't have love, it means absolutely nothing. And if you have the spiritual gift of giving and give away all you have, and even give away your body to be burned, but you are not doing it in love, it means nothing.

Spiritual gifts, Paul teaches, are to be used to build God's people up through love, not to tear them down. They are to be used at the discretion of a loving Christian community. You know, there are all kinds of people in this world who love to talk about the hypocrisy and the inconsistencies of the organized church. Certainly Paul knew all about that, as anyone who reads this letter or any of his other letters can attest. But in the end, Paul thought that the church was the best hope of humanity, because it is in this often imperfect place that we can learn how to properly use our gifts, and what it really means to love as God would have us love. And then he describes what love is to the Corinthians, which is not as easy as you think. I mean, if I were to ask you to define love, what would you say? I think Paul led by the Holy Spirit defined the word of love better than almost anyone else in human history-let's say together his words from your bulletin, "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. Love never ends." This is the kind of love that we are to have for one another in the church, so that we truly can be the body of Christ. And yes, this is also the kind of love that we are to have for one another in our friendships and in our romantic relationships, because this kind of love is the kind of love

that lasts. Paul uses the Greek word agape to describe this kind of love, and this is the word he also uses to describe God's love for us, a love that never gives up on us, a love that is ready to forgive us and help us live our lives once again with joy and hope in Jesus' name through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Writer Paula Dyer in a recent Guideposts magazine was writing about this kind of love in the relationship she had with her husband Philip, whom she shared 18 years with in marriage before his death. On the Valentine's Day after his death, she was really at an absolute low point, and she prayed, "Lord, I feel like I'm not going to make it without Philip. I need Your help." Suddenly, she writes, it was like the curtain was pulled back on a scene from my life. It was that early morning in June in the ER. They had decided they couldn't save Philip. A nurse took me into the room so I could say goodbye, and then she slipped out. It was just Philip and me.

I was relieved to see that he looked peaceful, as if he were only sleeping. I kissed him on the forehead. I knew that he was close to the end. And then I remembered Father Brian's homily from Sunday, about the three most important things you can say to someone you love. Philip and I had repeated those sentences to each other on our way home from church, wanting to hold on to them. So now I leaned over and hugged him, my head resting on his chest. "I'm sorry," I said. I stood and held both of his hands in mine. I forgive you. And then I stroked his face, my finger resting on the dimple on his chin, and I said "I love you." I felt so close to him in that moment.

Now I am still on my journey of acceptance and healing, learning to be happy again. When I'm filled with regret, I tell Philip, "I'm sorry." When I'm overcome with loneliness for him, I say "I forgive you." One day I know, I will see him again. Until then, I will hold him in my heart and tell him, "I love you." You know, each of your relationships in life are a gift, whether here in the church or outside of it. Maybe you need to say one of these three things to someone in your life. Maybe as a way of making your love clear for someone in your life, you need to say to them, "I'm sorry" "I messed something up", or "I forgive you" "I forgive you for what you have done", or simply "I love you." "I love you who you are in my life-you are a gift of God to me." We give thanks for St. Paul teaching us about the nature of love today through his spiritual gift, and may you and I love like this to the glory of God, Amen.