

NOW IS THE TIME TO LOVE FEBRUARY 14 2010

ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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Today is St. Valentine's Day, the day when we celebrate God's gift of love among people.

Paul tells us that the love we have for other people is the highest and most important virtue in the Christian life in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth. These are the verses that brides and grooms choose to have read in about half of the weddings I perform. However, we have all heard these words read so often that we fail to understand the depth and meaning of what Paul tells us.

Here is the part of First Corinthians 13 where Paul writes about the characteristics of a loving person.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-13: 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. 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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 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. 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

LOVE IS PATIENT, LOVE IS KIND; THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE.

Prayer

There are many legends which have been told to explain why we celebrate Valentine's Day on February 14. One of the most commonly told legends is that Emperor Claudius the second, the Roman Emperor in the third century, wanted to increase the effectiveness of the Roman soldiers who were drafted to serve in the Roman army. He decided that married men with wives and children back home were not as effective as single soldiers because they were always concerned about getting back to their wives and families and not willing to take as many risks as single men were.

To solve this problem, Emperor Claudius decreed that no more young men would be allowed to be married in Rome. He outlawed marriage for all young men and women! However, a Roman Catholic Priest, named Father Valentine, continued to perform weddings for young couples in secret and against the Roman law.

Father Valentine was discovered breaking the Roman law banning marriage among young people and was put into prison. While he was in prison, young couples would come by his cell at night and throw flowers or thank you notes through the bars to thank him for performing their wedding at the risk of his own life.

Eventually, Father Valentine was executed for breaking the Roman law and years later, the Roman Catholic Church canonized him as a saint of the church. People started celebrating St. Valentine's Day on February 14 because that was the day that Father Valentine was executed for performing marriages for young couples.

It seems to me appropriate that we have a day to celebrate and thank God for the gift of love and affection that people feel for each other.

In his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul tells us that love among human beings as the highest and most important virtue in the Christian faith.

Paul tells us that love and concern for others is a more important virtue than faith or having the right belief which is unusual because Paul has a great deal of concern about having faith in God.

Paul says that love is a higher value than possessing great knowledge or wisdom which is unusual because Paul has great wisdom and knowledge himself.

Paul says that love is a higher value than the ability to preach eloquently or to be filled with the spirit and speak in tongues. This is also unusual because Paul was an eloquent preacher and also had the gift of speaking in tongues.

Paul says that we may have great faith, great knowledge, great speaking ability or even be able to speak in tongues but if we don't have love to go with those gifts, they amount to nothing. For Paul, love is the underlying commitment to care for other people that makes all the other gifts effective.

Paul concludes his chapter on love by saying that faith, hope and love are all eternal but the greatest gift of all is love and compassion for others.

Now the love that Paul is talking about is not primarily a feeling. The love Paul is talking about expresses itself in an action, an observable behavior.

Genuine love is a behavior you can see and describe. Love is what love does. People may say they love someone but they if they don't demonstrate it by their behavior it is not genuine love.

In First Corinthians 13 Paul mentions two qualities or actions of a loving person that you can observe and seven negative qualities which a loving person will avoid.

I would like to suggest that if we practice these two actions in all of our relationships our love will move from being lip service to genuine love.

Paul says Love is patient which means that first of all a loving person is a patient person.

If we say we love someone we will demonstrate that love by being patient with them. Would you describe yourself as a patient person? Would the people you love describe you as patient?

When we really love someone we realize that as human beings they are not perfect; they will make mistakes and they will disappoint us at one time or another. Can you think of a time when someone you love has made a mistake - done something wrong and disappointed you? Can you think of a time when you have done something to disappoint another person?

I suspect that all of us can think of a time when someone we love has disappointed us and times when we have disappointed someone who loves us.

I know that there are numerous times when I have disappointed my wife and my family and I thank God for their patience with me and their forgiveness. And I suspect the same thing is true of most of us.

Paul makes it clear that to love someone is to be patient with them.

However, today many of us are known for our impatience. We get impatient if we have to wait in a long line at the grocery store, or post office, or in traffic. How many times have you been waiting in a line someplace and heard people around you start complaining.

Last Friday I flew to Rapid City to speak at a convention for pastors and lay leaders from the Dakotas. However, my plane was late getting from Indianapolis to Minneapolis and I missed the flight to Rapid City. The next flight to Rapid City was overbooked so I couldn't get on it.

I called a District Superintendent in Rapid City about my dilemma and he asked me if I could get a flight to Fargo, North Dakota because they had a video conference system there where I could give my keynote address in Fargo and they could see and hear it in Rapid City and in five other communities around the Dakotas where there were video conference systems. I flew to Fargo and gave my addresses via video conference system to people in six different locations where I could see them and they could see and hear me. It was an amazing experience.

However I had to wait in the Minneapolis airport 8 hours from 9 am to 5 pm before I went to Fargo. While waiting I got acquainted with other stranded travelers and went to lunch with one man. When he found out I was a pastor he asked me what I was preaching on Sunday and I said, "Patience." He said, "Now you will have a chance to practice what you preach!"

Are you ever impatient?

I once heard a story about a husband and wife who had three young children and were getting ready to go to church one Sunday morning. The husband got himself ready and the wife had to get herself and their three children dressed and ready for church. The husband was impatient with how long it was taking for the rest of his family to get ready so he backed the car out of the garage and became so impatient that he started honking the horn on the car to try to let his family know that he was ready to go and to make them hurry faster.

When his wife heard the car honking, she came out to the car, opened the door and said to her husband: "Honey, let's trade jobs today. You go in the house and get the children dressed and ready for church and I'll do your job; I'll sit out here in the car and honk the horn to make you hurry up."

The husband got the point and went back in the house to help his wife get the children dressed for church.

Love is not just a feeling toward someone. Love is a behavior that you can see and measure. Paul says that we demonstrate our love towards someone else by our practice of patience toward them. The way to become more loving in your family is to become more patient with those you love.

Patience is a virtue not only with those we love but with all the issues we face in life.

RAINER MARIA RILKE, a famous Austrian poet, once wrote these words:

BE PATIENT TOWARD ALL THAT IS UNSOLVED IN YOUR HEART AND TRY TO LOVE THE QUESTIONS THEMSELVES....THE POINT IS TO LIVE THE QUESTIONS.

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart is good advice for all of us in all circumstances of life. When we have questions we want to have them answered right now. We want some authority to give us the right answers immediately so we can get on with our lives.

But life doesn't work that way. When you have questions in your heart about something in your life or in the world, it is good advice to be quiet and patient and live with that question in your heart and you will discover that an answer comes in its own good time when we are really ready for it.

Another way to put it is: BE PATIENT WITH ME, GOD ISN'T FINISHED WITH ME YET.

Think about how patient God has to be with each of us. We make promises to follow Jesus, to make time for daily devotions and pray to God, to be more loving and forgiving, to be more generous with our time, talent and treasure, and to serve people in need in our community and world.

We make commitments like this and then we fail to keep them consistently. At least I fail to keep them consistently. I realize how patient God is with me and my goal is to try to be as patient with other people as God is with me.

Love is patient. Today I suggest that we all practice patience. When you are at a restaurant today be patient with the waiters and the other customers. When you spend time today with family or loved ones listen patiently to them and treat them as if you have all the time in the world to listen to their concerns. Don't allow yourself to be distracted by your own agenda; just be patient and loving to all those around you.

Paul says: Love is patient and Love is kind.

Would you describe yourself as a kind person? Are you considerate to the other people in your family and with whom you work?

A few years ago we talked a lot about practicing random acts of kindness to overcome the random acts of violence that take place in the world. We encouraged all of us to simply do acts of kindness to people we don't even know.

When going to a fast food drive through, pay for the person's food in the car behind you and tell the server to tell them "this is a random act of kindness and ask them to pass it on."

When driving in traffic, let another car go in front of you as a random act of kindness.

After I preached a sermon on random acts of kindness, our parking lot attendants told me it was almost impossible for anyone to get out of the parking lot that Sunday. Every driver would motion to another driver to go first and the other driver would motion for them to go first. While it may take a little longer to get out of the parking lot, it is far better than people cutting each other off in the church parking lot to get to a restaurant first.

My image is that every act of selfishness or greed puts a little cloud of darkness over the world and blocks out some of the light of the sun. But every act of kindness that we perform sends up a shaft of light and drives away the darkness and allows the light of God shine through.

Genuine love is kind. Sometimes it may be easier to be kind to people outside of our family that we don't know well than to be kind to people inside our families.

I know that there are times when I have been very kind and considerate to people in the church and then went home and been grouchy and unkind to my own family. Have you ever done that? When I discover myself doing that I always think what a hypocrite I am. I can be patient and kind to other people and then be impatient and unkind to those I love the most. Does that ever happen to you? I suspect that all of us find it easier to be kind to someone we don't know so well than it is to always be kind and considerate to those with whom we live every day - the ones we often take for granted.

An old song put it this way: you always hurt the ones you love.

I know there are times when I have hurt the ones I love. Minnietta once called me at church and said she was sick and asked if I could come home to take care of our children. I said that I couldn't come right now because I was going to the hospital to visit a sick person. Minnietta replied: "I'M A SICK PERSON."

I realized that I was being compassionate to one of our parishioners but not compassionate to my wife when she was sick.

Someone once put it this way. "Be as kind and considerate to your family as you would be to some famous person who came to your house."

I once wrote a paraphrase of first Corinthians 13 using kindness as an example of love in action. Here is what I wrote:

I MAY HAVE A BRILLIANT MIND AND A WONDERFUL PERSONALITY,
BUT IF I AM NOT KIND, IT DOES ME NO GOOD.

I MAY HAVE A GOOD INCOME AND A BEAUTIFUL HOME,
BUT IF I AM NOT KIND, I DON'T MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD.

I MAY HAVE GREAT SUCCESS,

BUT IF I AM NOT KIND, I AM A FAILURE

KINDNESS IS LOVE IN ACTION.

KINDNESS IS THE PEBBLE IN THE POND WHOSE RIPPLES CHANGE THE WORLD.

HAVING FAITH TO MOVE MOUNTAINS IS GREAT,
HAVING HOPE IN BLEAK TIMES IS WONDERFUL,
BUT BEING KIND TRANSFORMS LIVES AND LASTS FOREVER.

I MAY HAVE MANY WONDERFUL QUALITIES IN MY LIFE,
BUT IF I AM NOT KIND, THEY ARE NOT ENOUGH.

Tomorrow we celebrate Presidents Day honoring both our first President George Washington and the President who saved the United States from being divided into two nations, President Abraham Lincoln.

Both are noted for their patience and kindness toward others.

George Washington wrote some Rules of Civility for the people of this new nation to follow if we want to live together in harmony. Here are some of his rules for civility and kindness:

TREAT EVERYONE WITH RESPECT.
BE CONSIDERATE OF OTHERS.
DO NOT EMBARRASS OTHER PEOPLE.

Think what a kinder and more considerate society we would have today if more people followed President Washington's advice to treat everyone with respect, be considerate and never embarrass other people.

President Lincoln was also noted for his kindness as well. When President Lincoln got the word that the Southern General Robert E. Lee had surrendered the Confederate troops to the Union troops, President Lincoln was asked to speak to a large crowd gathered at the White House. Many expected him to come before the crowd with arms raised shouting, "We won the war." But that is not what President Lincoln did.

Lincoln came out to the gathered crowd and said, "I have always considered the song *Dixie* one of the best songs ever written so I have asked the band to play it." Everyone was shocked that the President did not boast over winning the war but instead had the band play *Dixie* which was the favorite song of the south.

But everyone listened respectfully as the favorite song of the south was played by the Army band. When it was concluded President Lincoln asked the band to play the favorite song of the North, *Yankee Doodle*, as a way of respecting the Northern troops as well and thus, as soon as the war was over he displayed an act of kindness towards the South and began the process of reconciliation between Northern and Southern states.

President Lincoln summarized his attitude to kindness towards those who were defeated with these famous words: WITH MALICE TOWARD NONE AND WITH CHARITY TOWARD ALL.

The famous Rabbi and Professor Abraham Heschel once said: WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I ADMIRE INTELLIGENT PEOPLE; AS I GROW OLDER, I ADMIRE KIND PEOPLE.”

Missionary doctor Albert Schweitzer wrote: CONSTANT KINDNESS CAN ACCOMPLISH MUCH. AS THE SUN MAKES ICE MELT, KINDNESS CAUSES MISUNDERSTANDING, MISTRUST, AND HOSTILITY TO EVAPORATE.

THE DALAI LAMA, who will be speaking at Conseco Fieldhouse here in Indianapolis on May 14 once said: THIS IS MY SIMPLE RELIGION; IT IS THE PHILOSOPHY OF PRACTICING KINDNESS TO EVERYONE.

According to the Apostle Paul, we practice love when we practice patience and kindness.

Last week when I was waiting in an airport, I saw a teenage girl about 16 or 17 standing by herself and crying profusely. She was sobbing her heart out. I suspected that she was saying goodbye to someone she loved or facing some other challenge in her life.

About that time, I saw a woman who obviously did not know this girl go over to her and say something and the girl just collapsed into her arms and wept. All the rest of us just stood around watching this scene. Eventually the girl composed herself and got in line to get on the plane.

I thought, “What a kind woman.” This woman didn’t know this girl but she gave her some words of comfort and a shoulder to cry on.

Love is expressing kindness to people in pain and to all those around us.

Today is the final Sunday of our two month emphasis on NOW IS THE TIME. Our theme today is NOW IS THE TIME TO LOVE and we love when we practice patience and kindness to all those around us. We encourage us all to do it now. Don’t put it off any longer. Practice patience and kindness now.

Sometimes people say that they will become more patient and kind someday, when they get around to it.

I am holding in my hand a round tuit. This is a round piece of wood with the words “tuit” on it so this is a round tuit.

When you leave the service today we will give you a round tuit to carry in your pocket or purse. Whenever you think about procrastinating or putting off being patient and kind to the people around you until you get around to it, just look at this and put away your excuses and become more patient and kind because you now have a round tuit.

CARRIE NEWCOMER is one of my favorite musicians. She writes songs with deep meaning and sings from her heart. She has a song entitled “IF NOT NOW” which we have asked her to sing for us in this service to remind us that now is the time for us to love.

PRAYER