

MODERATOR SERMON – ASSEMBLY 2018

The Rev. Peter Bush, Moderator of the 143rd General Assembly

(I Corinthians 13)

I begin with a word of thanks. Thank you to the church for the last year as you have invited me to preach, to be present at Presbytery meetings, have engaged in times of Q&A with me, thank you. Thank you for the support and encouragement to post prayers. Thank you.

I say thank you to this church that I love for the love and care you have shown to me this year.

I will say more about my year as Moderator of the 2017 (143rd) General Assembly tomorrow night.

The church in Corinth was a deeply divided church. There were at least four distinct factions and they all had names by which they distinguished themselves from the other groups. The interpersonal divisions were so deep that church members were suing each other in the civil courts. They could not agree on what food to bring to the church potluck – and some people would not attend the potlucks because other people would bring “that food”. The behavior towards each other was terrible – disrespect was the order of the day. Including being so disrespectful in worship that people came to the Lord’s supper with the intention of getting drunk (they had a full meal with the Communion meal – they were not trying to get drunk on a thimble full of wine).

As Paul was moving towards the completion of his letter he tackled one more source of conflict in the Corinthian church – the ways people used their spiritual gifts. People with certain kinds of gifts were eager to prove how much better they were than other members of the church who did not have specific kinds of gifts. All of this led to more disrespectful action – more conflict. Paul takes two long chapters to deal with this challenge which was tearing the church in Corinth apart – that is chapters 12 and 14.



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Buried between those two chapters – addressed to a conflicted church comes chapter 13 – also to a conflicted church.

I know that these days we are most likely to hear chapter 13 read at a wedding – but that was not the original context. So please hear these words written to a church in conflict.

READ I CORINTHIANS 13

This sentence may not be easy to hear – but I have come to the following conclusion: “We do not like each other.” “We as members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada are alienated from one another.”

The numerous conflicts among us have engaged some in heated, at times angry, debate; other people feel like outsiders who are overlooked and ignored; still others feel that their every move and every word is analyzed and open to challenge; and yet others having been hurt choose to keep their heads down and have no expectation that the church is a place that can address their hurt. I don’t want to go into more detail – but I invite us all to think of the disparaging, insulting, hurtful words we have used to describe those we are at odds with.

I Corinthians 13 comes to us as a passage inviting us to think about how we talk with, be with, people we disagree with, people, in fact, we don’t like. How do we show love to our opponent?

I want us to notice the grammar of the opening sentences. “If I have...” – in other words, readers/hearers are to understand the invitation is to ask themselves if they are showing love to the people or groups of people they are in conflict with. This text is not one where we read it and say to ourselves – “Those people over there who are my opponents – this chapter is for them.” No, by beginning with three “If I have...” sentences Paul is saying “Read this into your life – let the text read your life. So the point of this sermon is not that we all go from here saying – “I wish so-and-so had been here to listen to that sermon” – this sermon invites each of us, myself included, to do some self-examination.



I would suggest a paraphrase of the opening sentences for June 2018 at Wilfrid Laurier that goes something like this:

If I have the ability to speak on the floor of General Assembly with such great eloquence that people are swayed by my words, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I have the passion and commitment of the prophets in calling for justice but do not have a love for those I am calling to change their ways, I am nothing.

If I know the truth and with conviction proclaim the truth, but do not have a love for those who I am calling to follow the truth, I am nothing.

If I have the faith to believe that God will act to bring about a miracle at this Assembly, and with faith pray earnestly for it, but I do not have love, I am nothing.

Do I love those who might be my opponents – those I disagree with? And what would that love look like?

We won't have time to unpack everything in vs. 4-7. Here we have a practical picture of what loving my opponent – the one I am in disagreement with – what that love looks like.

I will come back to "love is patient" – and move to "love is kind".

The Micah 6:8 text we heard as the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures drives home the same point – we are to seek justice – and to love kindness.

Kindness is not arrogant – kindness is gentle, it is gracious, it is attentive to the other – to the opponent. Kindness seeks the good for the other person. We hear the kindness of love in phrases like, "Speaking the truth in love." Sometimes love calls for difficult things to be said, but love says those things with kindness.



A.

Love is not rude. Rude interrupts the other because we think we know that they will say. Rude assumes that all the opponents are the same, thinking the same thing, all being in lock step with each other.

Rude asks “gotchya” questions whose purpose is not to find gain understanding but rather is to embarrass the other. With questions that paint the other in the worst possible light.

Rudeness breeds rudeness. If I act in a rude way towards my opponent, I am likely to get rudeness back. Paul drives this truth home as he writes, “Love is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs, it does not rejoice in evil.” Love does not have a short fuse.

One of the lies we tell children and which we sometimes tell ourselves is this – “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” But words do hurt us – stay with us – in conversation/debate with my opponent I need to make the commitment that I will not use words which are calculated to hurt. We will not use words to injure the person we are debating against. And if they hurt me with the words they use I will choose to turn the other cheek – simply absorbing the anger and the desire to hit back.

Love is not rude or arrogant – love is kind. Am I kind in the way I treat opponents?

B.

Love is patient and love hopes. In his brilliant book “Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church”, James Calvin Davis makes the point that patience depends on hope. If I have hope that a solution is possible – if I have hope that a resolution can be found – then I can live with patience. Even if the hope is fragile, hanging on by a thread – the hope makes patience possible. Once I have lost hope – then patience becomes far more difficult – because I have reached the place of no longer believing that there will be a way forward.



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I confess that in the last year as I have heard about the fault lines in the denomination – the depth of the dislike we have for each other – I have come close to losing hope. I have heard voices on all sides of the many fault lines in the denomination who are also close to losing hope. When hope is lost – patience becomes brittle and breaks easily. While love may be the greatest – love without hope quickly turns brittle and breakable.

I promise to not leave this hopelessness unanswered – I will come back. But the text leaves it hanging for the moment.

C.

You may have noticed that at most wedding services the reading from I Cor 13 ends at vs. 8a “Love never fails”. Because the next paragraph does not fit well with weddings and seems confusing in that context. But in the context of a deeply conflicted church, I found that it has a powerful resonance.

The skills, the arguments, the reasoning, the Biblical and theological insights that we have and which we use to advance our arguments, to prove our points, to win over our opponents – they will all pass away. Why? Because they are the product of our being in a place where we are still children – we have not come to the place knowing as we are fully known. We have not yet come to the time when we see the Triune God of grace face-to-face. We see only in part – just as in a mirror we see only in part or in a photograph only see part. We live in incompleteness now – there is a day coming when we will see fully – a day is coming when we will know fully – but that day is not now. All our speaking should exhibit this fact – we cannot see fully – we do not know fully – we know and see only in part.

This is a call to humility – at the heart of love stands humility. Even my closest friends I do not fully know – and so I need to approach them with the humility of incomplete knowledge – of incomplete understanding. How much more then do I not fully know my opponents – how much more humility must I use for my knowledge of them is that much more incomplete. And then when I speak of God – I must do so with a humility that is even greater – for while I am fully known by God – my knowledge of



God is incomplete – and so with great humility I speak – speaking from what I know – but always rooted in the fact that I am limited.

(A tangent that we do not have time to explore – speaking with humility is not the same as doubt. Speaking with humility is rooted in the recognition that God is God who knows all things – and I am not God and I do not know all things. What I believe may need to be adjusted in the light of God. As I hinted at – this is a vast topic we have just stepped into – and that is where I am going to leave it.)

Back to the sermon, as we now head for the finish line.

Jesus, we would agree, is the iconic picture of love, and Jesus notes the significance of Humility in following Jesus' pattern of love – listen to the following:

Blessed are the poor in spirit (humble), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are the merciful (to show mercy requires some level of humility), for they will receive mercy.

And as the reading from Micah reminded us – human beings are called to walk humbly with God. Love is humble.

Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you.” He was speaking to the disciples who were divided by many things – there were those who supported the Roman government and those who wanted the Roman occupiers driven out; there were small time fishers who made a living from small operations, and there were heirs to a large corporate fishing enterprise – these two kinds of fishers would have been at odds, and then there was the frequently repeated debate about who was the greatest. The disciples were a divided group – Jesus said: “Love one another.” He went on to say, “I call you friends.”

So if Jesus has called you his friend – and he has called me his friend – then we share in common that we are friends of Jesus – and even if we are opponents – we need to figure out how to be friends. How to treat each other as friends?



If you are a friend of Jesus – and I am a friend of Jesus – then we better figure out how to be friends of each other. Because we are going to be seeing a great deal of each other. Don't have to like each other – just have to love each other.

There has been a great failure in this sermon so far – and I can hear Stephen Farris, one of my professors of preaching, asking – “Where is the grace?” Because so far this sermon has been about what I need to do, what we need to do – and it sounds as though we are to do this in our own strength. That we are to will up the ability to live this pattern of love for our opponent – love for those we are alienated from.

As Paul opened the letter of I Corinthians he pointed to the cross of Jesus Christ – a stumbling block and foolishness – but to those who are called by God – the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God. In the cross, there is a wisdom and a power that can bring us into the community God envisions for the church. The cross becomes the common ground upon which we stand – in the cross we find hope when hope seems lost – because the letter of I Corinthians ends with the promise that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ hope has been released in this world – hope not in our ability, not in our strength, not in human ingenuity – but hope in the power of God who knows how to get the dead out of the tomb.

The power of God that raised Jesus Christ to life again – that power is still at work in the world – for the risen Christ is still active in our world. And Jesus will raise our dead and dying hope. Jesus will raise our eyes to see beyond the divisions and alienation – beyond the dislike and the hurts – to find healing and the new way that comes to us in work of the risen Christ. The risen Christ alone can show us how to love our opponent, the risen Christ alone can show us how to be in community with those we are alienated from. The risen Christ can show us how to live in love with one another.

The crucified and risen Christ is our only hope of learning how to be a church in which we love our opponents.



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