

“United by Love . . .”

The words of covenantal agreement that unite us as a congregation opens with the statement: *United by the love of one another and the teachings of Jesus . . .* As you may recall, Jesus once summed up all the laws of Moses and the teachings of the prophets in two great Commandments. First: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Second: Love your neighbor as yourself. In a non-doctrinal way we proclaim that the love of Jesus is the unifying force in our community of faith. In his mission statement on the church Palmer Parker named love as the key ingredient for Christian community. *The mission of the church is not to enlarge its membership, not to bring outsiders to accept its terms, but simply to love the world in every possible way---to love the world as God did and does . . . If we are able to love the world, that will be the best demonstration of the truth which the church has been given* (Sermon Seeds, Jan. 31, 2010).

But if love rules in the church why then are there so many people like Henry Jones who awoke to find his wife standing over him, shaking him by the shoulder. “You have to get up,” she urged. “We have to get ready for church.” “I don’t want to go to church,” he replied. “I want to stay in bed.” Crossing her arms over her chest, his wife demanded, “Give me three good reasons why you should stay in bed and not go to church.” “O.K.,” he answered. “First, I don’t get anything out of the service. Second, I don’t like the people there. And third, no one there likes me. Now can you give me three good reasons why I should go to church?” His wife responded, “First, it will do you some good. Second, there are people who really do like you, and they’ll miss you if you aren’t there. And third, you’re the minister!” (Encyp. 19).

When the church members in the first gentile church in Corinth failed to love each other as Jesus loved, the start-up leader devoted a whole chapter in his letter to the congregation on the essential qualities of God’s Love. 1 Corinthians 13 is known as the love chapter of the Bible. As the description of love unfolds, love becomes a verb that is characterized by communion, compassion, and commitment to the well being of the other. Love is mutual,

reciprocal, and equal in nature. Love of this kind draws us outside of ourselves into relationships in which we are transformed into people lovers after the manner of Jesus.

A recent cyberspace e-mail, “Perception,” gets us thinking about boundary crossing and getting outside the self.

In a Washington, D.C. Metro Station on a cold January morning in 2007, a man with a violin played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time approximately two thousand people went through the station, most of them on their way to work. After three minutes a middle aged man noticed there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds and then hurried to meet his schedule. Four minutes later: The violinist received his first dollar: a woman threw the money in the hat and, without stopping, continued to walk. 6 minutes: a young man leaned against the wall to listen to him, then looked at his watch and started to walk again; 10 minutes: a 3 year old boy stopped but his mother tugged him along hurriedly. The kid stopped to look at the violinist again, but the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk, turning his head all the time. This action was repeated by several other children. Every parent, without exception, forced their children to move on quickly. 45 minutes: The musician played continuously. Only six people stopped and listened for a short while. About twenty gave money but most continued to walk at their normal pace. The man collected a total of \$32. 1 hour: He finished playing and silence took over. No one noticed . . . No one applauded, nor was there any recognition. No one knew this, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the greatest musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, with a violin worth \$3.5 million dollars. Two days before Joshua Bell sold out a theater in Boston where the seats averaged \$100. This is a true story, Joshua Bell playing incognito in the metro station was organized by the Washington Post as part of a social experiment about perception, taste and people’s priorities. The questions raised: In a common place environment at an inappropriate hour, do we perceive beauty? Do we stop to appreciate it? Do we recognize talent in an unexpected context? The Washington Post research article ended with these concluding remarks. One possible conclusion reached from this experiment could be this: if we do not have a moment to stop and listen to one of the best musicians in the world, playing some of the finest music ever written, with one of the most beautiful instruments ever made---How many other things are we missing?

These are good introspective questions to ask about our ability to stop and smell the roses. And because I had experienced a situation almost identical to the Washington Post’s research in the Boston

subway on First Night, I could give first hand answers them all. Did I hear the extraordinary music from the violinist in the subway? Yes. As soon as the train pulled away and I heard the music, my ears signaled my eyes to search for the location of the musician. Did I stop and take notice of it? Yes. I asked my husband, "Do you hear that beautiful music?" Did I recognize talent in an unexpected context? Yes. I wondered why the violinist was not employed by the Boston Symphony orchestra and I ran through the list of possible social and economic justice issues related to the situation. "Yes, yes, yes," was my 100% perception rate. But the thing that I realized was missing for me was my inability to make personal connection and to take loving action. I could not enter his musical space because a deep pit of subway tracks stood between the musician and me. I could not cross over to drop money into the violinist's collection plate, give a smile, or thank the musician personally. On that boundary line of love that day, I felt sad. What was missing was love's joy of communion. Social justice activist Julie Potter has noted that: *This is the big lie the world tells us: that the universe is connected by trade agreements, electronic banking, computer networks, shipping lanes, and the seeking of profit---nothing else. Whereas this is the truth of God: all creation is one holy web of relationships, and gifts meant for all, that creation vibrates with the pain of all its parts, because its true destiny is joy* (Serom Seeds, Jan. 31, 2010).

Now the good news is that the covenant that joyfully unites all creation with one another is woven together with Love. The bad news is that the love that unites us is often of the human variety. Henry Nouwen said: "Only God gives First Love. Human beings can only give second love." We see in a mirror dimly," as did the people in the first church in Corinth in the first century A.D. In a recent publication of Weavings, editor John Mogbgab wrote: *Toward the end of his life, Benedict of Nursia received an extraordinary vision while he was praying one night. Suddenly, Benedict saw a great light from on high infusing the darkness with a luminous splendor that outshone the midday sun. Gregory the Great, Benedict's biographer, describes what happened next: "A marvelous thing followed in this contemplation for, as he himself*

related afterwards, the whole world was brought before his eyes, gathered up, as it were, under a single ray of sun." To see the world in the transfiguring light of God's grace rather than God in the distorting prisms of the world is the turning for which we must pray daily (Weavings, Jan. '10, p. 3).

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 13 Bruce Epperly puts a positive spin and hope on our human ability to only give second love. *While virtually everyone knows the qualities of love described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, few readers get as far as verses 9:13 which portray the agnosticism of love; that is, that although we pretend to know all about those we love and serve, we in fact "know only in part." We love our spouses, partners, friends, and those we serve in spite of our partial understanding. This agnosticism is a gift, a good thing, for when we think we fully know others or assume to know what's best for them, we are on the verge of objectifying or manipulating them. To acknowledge that we "prophesy in part: is the first step in honest spiritual leadership and the primary antidote to religious idolatry, intolerance and fanaticism. When in truth the other is always a mystery, and the most mysterious Other is the God of whom we speak and preach. Jesus proclaimed the words of the prophet Isaiah to his hometown congregation, his listeners believed that they had him figured out; they also thought they had God figured out. They believed that they knew all about God, and about the scope and limits of God's love. When Jesus describes God's care for foreigners and enemies, they try to kill him.*

I wonder, can our distorted image of our Maker be corrected by learning and practicing love as Jesus loved? I wonder, do we have the gift of a healthy agnostic faith at the boundary limit of our love? I wonder, will the promise that Mystery makes to transform our human ability to love come true even as we pray the song:

**Open the eyes of my heart, Lord. Open the eyes of my heart.
I want to see You, I want to see you. To see You high and lifted up,
shining in the light of Your glory;
pour out Your pow'r and love as we sing "Holy, holy, holy."
(Paul Baloche, 1962).**