



God's Beloved World

TEXT
1 Corinthians 13

October 30, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In the next few weeks, we will be doing two things. This sermon series will reflect on the last words we hear in this service: the benediction. The choir will even sing the final phrases.

But this is also a stewardship series, a sermon series where we remember why it is important to support the work of the church financially. Nothing we do happens without your financial support. In a week or so, you will receive in the mail a pledge card. I hope you will fill that out and bring it back. These are important days for the church. I hope you return your pledge card because I think it matters when communities like this have a church like you.

When we gather here, the love of God welcomes us. Oh, it's not that the love of God lives here and not elsewhere. We know better. God is not tied to place. But we are. Places carry memory, and this church is filled with memory. It is not that God's love is more present in this room, but perhaps it is in this room that we remember how God's love is always present, welcoming us. Love is always in this room.

There was a wedding here. Nikki and Sean are married. They were so happy. I imagine when you heard these words read, your

mind may have drifted to a wedding. You could see the women in matching dresses; the guys in shoes that shine like motor oil; the wedding party bestrewn in flowers. And the reader proclaims, "If I have not love, I am nothing." These are wedding words to us, but not to the apostle Paul.

Paul did not write these words with a wedding in mind. Paul wrote this because the Corinthian church was in crisis. They were tearing each other down. They were questioning each other's faithfulness. They were offering a very poor witness to their neighbors. Paul writes to them, "I have a more excellent way. . . . Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or arrogant or rude."

This is really important because it reveals that the Christian practice of love is not a feel-good, bumper-sticker, sentimental sapiness. The love that the apostle speaks of is disciplined and courageous. It's not sentimental — although you couldn't have told me that on my wedding day.

My wedding was in South Carolina in August. It was 102 degrees. If you stayed outside too long, it would melt your hair. We held our reception in the church fellowship hall because anything called an "event space" was way out of our budget. My brother

flew in for the wedding, but lost the key to his suitcase. You remember the old suitcases that had the key locks? He wore his rented tux the entire weekend.

But like most weddings, ours was perfect because I was marrying the perfect woman. And she would tell you that she was marrying the perfect man. Of course, that was our assessment on our wedding day. There have been a few moments over the last 29 years where we have wondered if "perfect" were the best word. Because all relationships know plenty and want, joy and sorrow, sickness and health. There is good and bad.

And because that's the truth, sentimentality isn't strong enough to get you through. Christian love is not sentimental because it is not ultimately a declaration of something we feel. It is something we choose. Listen to it: *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not arrogant or boastful or rude. It does not rejoice in wrong, but rejoices in the truth.*

These aren't feelings; they are choices. To love is to choose to live for the good of another. To say that the love of God is waiting to welcome us is not to say what God feels. It is a statement of God's choice to welcome us, to redeem us, to never let go of us.

Billy and Beth had been married for years. She called. “Tom, you better come down here; we need to talk.” They had had a spat. I don’t know how it happened really, but it began when Billy was painting a closet door in the garage. He was sure he had told her. But when Beth came home from the store, she opened the garage door and drove right over it, leaving tire tracks on the freshly painted door.

“I can’t believe you did that! I told you I was painting the door.” “Did not,” ... “Did too” ... that kind of thing. He said, “Well, I’m not painting it again. I’ll show you!” He hung the closet door, with tire tracks going right up the door.

She said, “Looks perfect. I’ve been telling my friends how you drive me up the wall. Now they can see for themselves.”

Now, you may have had a moment or two like that in your life. You may even have called the preacher: “Come on down; we need to talk.” And if you did, think about this. What would you do if the preacher, in that moment, sat at your breakfast room table and said, “Love is patient and kind, love is not irritable or resentful or rude”? You might be tempted to throw that preacher out.

But this is exactly what Paul does. In the moment when tensions are high, in the moment when connection seems strained, it is in that moment that Paul reminds the Corinthians what love looks like.

My friend Leanne is a pastor of a small congregation in Alabama. She says she learned a bit

of what love looks like from Jack. He’s 91, and every time she visits him, he speaks of Frances. They were “a match made in heaven,” he said. They were married for 17 years — a love that caught them by surprise after both found themselves widowed. Frances volunteered as the church organist for over 50 years. She loved the old hymns and hated the new ones — so you could sing new hymns, but she wouldn’t play them. Jack adored her.

Frances developed Alzheimer’s. It was harsh. Many afternoons Jack would drive her around town. He discovered it soothed her, until she grew ready to go home. “Take me home,” she would insist. So Jack would pull into the driveway of the home she had lived in for decades. But not recognizing it, she would protest: “No, I want to go home.” He would pull the car out of the driveway, and she would calm down as they would drive around a bit more until the shadows began to lengthen. Then they would go home.¹

Love is patient. Love is kind. And it is strong and courageous and disciplined. Love is chosen. And love is not just the choice we make when blossoms fill the spring air or all is right with the world. Love is the choice when nothing else works.

John Powell, a professor of Law and African American Studies, has said, “We don’t have confidence in love. We have much more confidence in anger and hate. We believe anger is powerful. We believe hate is powerful. And we believe love is wimpy.”² Maybe he is right. We certainly

see people choosing hatred. We see people being shaped by anger. They do feel like powerful emotions. Can love stand up against such force? What do you think?

Often when we see acts of hatred, we wonder, “Who taught that person to hate?” We have to be taught to hate. But I was struck by the words of John Lewis, the congressman and former civil rights leader who, reflecting on the civil rights movement as a movement of love, said, “We prepared ourselves. It’s just not something that is natural. You have to be taught the way of peace, the way of love, the way of nonviolence.”³

We have to be taught to love? At one level yes. Because the love that John Lewis speaks of is the same kind of love of which the apostle speaks. It is not a feeling alone. It is the choice we make when things have fallen apart; when relationships are fragile; when communities or nations are angry; when the walls of division seem insurmountable. It is in those moments that the spiritually mature choice is to choose love.

We are called to participate in what Krista Tippett calls the “unfinished work of love.”⁴

That’s why it is so important that we gather here — because our souls need to be reminded again and again. We need to be taught that this love is a power, and it can be trusted.

As you know, I was away last week. I was invited to preach for my former congregation in South Carolina. It is the first church that I served as pastor. They are the congregation that baptized our children. It was quite emotional

to see those good folks. Carol and I left that congregation 20 years ago.

We still knew a majority of the folks who were there; but I was mindful of some who were not there. There was a small group of men in that church who decided that together, they would teach me how to be a pastor.

There was Tom. He would take me to lunch every month or so; and over a Greek salad at Zorba's, we would talk about things that I should be paying attention to, plans that we should make.

There was Leonard; I've told you about him. He was the one who, when he first saw me, thought that I looked like I was still in high school. I wasn't nearly old enough to be his pastor. And yet, he let me be his pastor.

There was Richard. He was the encourager. Every sermon was always better than the last.

And there was Monroe — a deep water, strong and quiet type. He intimidated the socks off of me and enjoyed it.

And there was Joe. He loved that church and, in a way, taught me to love the church. I disappointed him on occasion. It was hard for us. But even during those times, he stayed with me. If I could, I would have told him this past weekend that I was sorry I had disappointed him.

Leonard died shortly after we left. He had lived a long life. Richard, Tom and Joe all died much too early; I'm not sure any of them escaped their sixties.

Monroe and I talked last weekend. I realized what I learned

from those men was not just how to run a meeting or how to visit someone in the hospital. I learned that grace can be trusted; that love is a power. I was 30 years old and not close to being spiritually mature enough to lead that congregation. They knew that.

Monroe said, "We knew you would mess up. We knew what it was like to be in the first five years of your career. So we decided, good or bad, we weren't going anywhere." He didn't use these words, but what I heard him saying is, *Love is patient and kind. It doesn't rejoice in the wrong but rejoices in the truth. Loves does not let go.*

When we enter this sanctuary, the love of God is waiting to welcome us. Because every week we need to be reminded that love can be trusted. And every week we need to be reminded that hatred is strong, but love is stronger; that anger is strong, but love is stronger; that apathy is corrosive, but love is stronger. There is the unfinished work of love that this world so desperately needs, and God sends us out with the reminder that his love can be trusted.

In a few weeks, the long walk of campaigns will come to a close. And no matter how it concludes, some will be relieved and some will be disappointed . . . even worried. We have watched candidates at every level do their best to destroy the character or the person he or she is running against — as if to make the argument, "I may not be much, but at least I am not as bad as that person." That's the argument my mother would no longer ac-

cept from me as early as middle school.

This community, this nation, needs love: some patience and some kindness; a desire not to rejoice in the wrong, but to rejoice in the truth; a willingness to hold on. This nation needs some folks who are willing to stand tall when things are falling apart and trust that the love of God is more powerful than anything else.

It won't be easy; it cost Jesus his life. It won't be natural; it has to be learned — which is why we will need a church, so that we can learn that the love of God can be trusted. At least I know that I need a church. Don't you?

¹I am grateful to Rev. Leanne Pearce Reed, one of the finest pastors I know, for sharing this story with the Moveable Feast, January 2016.

²Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise* (2016), p. 121

³*Ibid.*, p. 111

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 113

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.