**House Church**

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**Loving the One Right in Front of You**

**1 Corinthians 13**

***“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I can predict the future, if can understand all mysteries and solve complex problems, if I have great knowledge, but don’t have love, I am nothing. If I have a faith enough to move mountains, if I give my body to be burned, if I give all that I possess to the poor,but do not love, I gain nothing.***

***Love is patient, love is kind. It is not arrogant or rude. Love is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs, but rejoices in the successes of the loved one.  Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.***

***Love never fails. These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”***

The last time I had the privilege to speak to you, we focused on the importance of conserving what Peter says about God in a sermon he preached at one of the most important moments in the early Church, when the first Christians came to understand that the love of God, confirmed in the resurrection of Jesus, was not just for Jews, but extended to all of humanity. In that sermon, Peter describes God’s love in these terms: God is impartial, God is inclusive, and God is free to extend love to all of us in this world. Therefore, we as Christians, who called to be God’s image and to do God’s work in the world, we who are loved by God, must have love at the core of our being, love that we extent to those we meet every day.

**Love is the single most important piece of evidence that we are connected to God.**

Last time, we ended with this question, “Whom then should we love?” That’s our topic today.

The point I’d like to make today this: We can move far along the path that leads to becoming the kind of Christian that God wants us to be if we simply love the **person who is right in front of us**. Loving others begins with the ability to be fully present in a loving way to the person who is right in front of you.

When I was starting out as a business consultant, a man in my church, Wayne Glenn, a former CEO at Conoco, introduced me to the then current Conoco CEO, Archie Dunham. Mr. Dunham took me under his wing, introduced me to his leadership team, and to the world of oil and gas. Several years later, when I was teaching in the Executive MBA program at the University of Houston, the Dean asked me to teach the first course, a course on leadership, that the new students took as they started their business school careers. For the first lecture, I made a distinction between primary and secondary greatness. Secondary greatness involves mastering all the competencies, all the elements of business that the students learn during their time at business school. Primary greatness involves the elements of character, the values and ethics that guide leaders as they interact with people, make critical decisions and build a business. Throughout this first class, to make this point, I shared experiences I had and things I had learned from Mr. Dunham and other great leaders.

The next week, when I came into class, there was a gift on the lectern and on the gift was a note. It simply read, “Paul, please read this letter to the class, Archie.”

I opened the letter and the first sentence said this: “Barbara Velte (not her real name), one of our most valued employees, mentioned to me that you spoke about Conoco and our values in your first class,” and he went on to talk about Conoco’s values. But my mind was stuck on the name “Barbara Velte.” Who was she? Then I realized that she was a member of the class, sitting to my left in the front row. So, after class I called her up and thanked her for bringing in the gift and congratulated her for being such a valued employee! She said:

“Paul, I had nothing to do with the gift; I don’t know how it got here, and I certainly don’t feel like one of Conoco’s most valued employees. All I know is this: I am the night janitor in the administration building at Conoco, and last Thursday, the night after our first class, at 10 p.m., when Mr. Dunham was leaving, he saw me mopping the floor and stopped to talk with me. He asked me to tell him about myself. I told him that I was a single mom, and that I worked nights to make ends meet, and that I was trying to advance my career by going to business school. Then I told him about our first class and how you had talked about him and his leadership. Then he interrupted me, “You’re going to business school and you are our night janitor? We can do better than that for you. What are you doing tomorrow at 3 pm? Can you come to my office?”

So, on Friday afternoon, Barbara comes to Archie’s office and there, around his conference table, are the leaders of upstream, downstream, the General Counsel, the CFO, and the HR Director. He tells Barbara to sit down at the end of the table and he says to his leadership team, “Today we are going to find Barbara a job.” And so they did. The last I heard about Barbara, she had risen up in the company to become the Director of Global business unit for ConocoPhillips. But that’s not the end of the story. Right after that Friday afternoon meeting, Archie found out where and when Barbara’s class was being held and made sure that at the next class there was a gift and a note that read, “Barbara Velte, one of Conoco’s most valued employees.” Can you imagine how she felt? Can you imagine how the others in the class felt when they learned about a leader who treats his employees the way the Archie did. That’s primary greatness. And that’s loving the person who is right in front of you.

Archie is a Christian man, a deacon in his church. He understands the importance of being present and loving those right in front of you.

When we track through the Gospels, we see, again and again, that Jesus loves this way, caring for the person who is right in front of him:

* He is standing by the lake, sees three fishermen (Peter, James and John). He asks them, “How’s the fishing?” and by the end of the conversation, all three leave their careers and become his disciples. In that moment, their lives are changed forever (Luke 5:2).
* One day as Jesus is walking, he sees a man with leprosy; Jesus stops, touches and heals him, (Luke 5:12).
* Another day, Jesus is in someone’s house teaching. The house is jammed with curious listeners, when some men outside come with a paralyzed man on a stretcher. Because of the crowd, they can’t get into the house, so they pull the man up on top of the roof, cut a hole through it and lower him down, right in front of Jesus. Jesus stops talking, reaches out and immediately heals him (Luke 5:17).
* Another day, Jesus is walking along and he sees a tax collector and says “Follow me.” The man takes him to his house and throws a big banquet and invites all his tax collector friends. Jesus gets criticized for eating with sinners and says, “Look, the healthy don’t need a doctor, but the sick do. I’m here for the sinners.” (Luke 5:27)
* Then Jesus comes to Capernaum and a Roman centurion comes up to him and says, “I have a servant, whom I love. He’s sick and is going to die.” Jesus looks at him and says, “Even in Israel, I have not seen such great faith.” He sends the man home and when he gets there, he finds his servant alive and well (Luke 7:1).
* All this happens in just a couple of chapters at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel; we could go on and on.

For Jesus, loving was not about giving money or participating in a service project. He didn’t call a lot of meetings or make a lot of plans. Simply, as he lived and met people, he listened to them, was present with them and, in that moment, did what he could to meet their deepest physical, emotional and spiritual needs. Jesus loved the person, right in front of him, no matter who it was.

Jesus specifically makes this point in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. A man is walking along the road to Jericho, when he is beaten, robbed and left in critical condition alongside the road. A priest and a legal scholar come by, see the man and walk right by him. Then comes the Samaritan, who sees the man right in front of him, he is moved with compassion, he treats his wounds, sets him on his donkey, takes him to the nearest inn, cares for him there, and later, as he leaves, he tells the innkeeper that he will pay him to take care of the man until he returns (Luke 10:30-37).

So, right in front of us, who are the people that God wants us to love? There are three contexts of life where loving the person right in front of us is crucially important for our role as Christians in this world.

1. The first person, right in front of you, whom you are called to love, is one we often neglect. It’s often the first person we see in the morning, the person you see when you look in the mirror. God wants you to love yourself. Christian self-love is not the same as arrogance or pride. It has more to do with self-acceptance, with a sense of comfort we have about ourselves, mind, body and soul, despite our imperfections. Self-love is at the root of our ability to love others.

Psychologists often use the word, “congruence,” to describe people who have a healthy self-love. You are a congruent person, when you have the ability to be a real person, just the way you are—talents and flaws.

When you love yourself, you realize that you have strengths that can be useful for yourself and in your relationships, and weaknesses that can be addressed and sometimes overcome. When we are congruent, we know and own our emotions and "ring true” as human beings. There is an inner honesty and consistency about us, which makes it possible for others to really know and relate to us. We know we make mistakes. We are able to admit them and to make good use of them as we move along life's journey. As my Grandma Wilson used to tell me, “Paul, you’re not as good as the best things that people say about you; you’re not as bad as the worst things that people say about you, your just in there, somewhere in the middle, and every day, you are learning more and more about how to be a good man.” There, “in the middle,” is a great place to be, because it takes the pressure off of having to be perfect.

Self-acceptance and self-knowledge are, for Christians, products of faith. When we know the unconditional love of God, that God accepts us as we are, warts and all, when we know that our destiny is fixed in God’s love, life becomes a free educational process. We are able to accept honestly where we are now and hold a vision of what we might become. It’s a sad reality for many Christians that, while we often have no problem forgiving others, we often have difficulty forgiving ourselves—to release our secret shame for things that we have done, for our own shortcomings. If only we could see ourselves through the loving eyes of God. Congruence, honest self-knowledge, self-acceptance and self-love is God’s gift to us and is a precondition for our ability to love others, for intimacy and friendship.

Another important way to love yourself is to understand that God does not want you to remain in pain or confusion. What God wants for you is abundant life. Sometimes Christians get mixed up about this because there is a big theological misunderstanding around the word “suffering.” We’ve heard that we are supposed to share in the sufferings of Christ, take up our cross and follow in Jesus’s way of pain and death. But what does this mean?

In the New Testament suffering is not the same as pain. Suffering is rather something we do with our pain, what we do with any disruption of life that seeks to steal our freedom and vitality. The word "suf­fering" comes from two Latin words: "fero," which means "to carry" or "to bear," and "suf," which is a form of "sub," which means "from beneath" or "below." To suffer means to come up under something and work to overcome it. When Jesus says “take up your cross and follow me,” we are not nailed to the cross, we are carrying it to the place where Jesus wants us to go, toward understanding, toward peace, toward life and abundance.

When life is disrupted or broken, we have options for dealing with pain: we can despair before it; we can anesthetize ourselves against pain with drugs or alcohol, or any number of diversions; we can ignore pain, stoically denying that we're hurting; or we can use our pain as an excuse for feeling victimized, for blaming others or God for our predicament. But Jesus' way of dealing with pain, Jesus' way of countering the disruptions of life, is the way of the suffering: it’s purposely therapeutic. When we love ourselves, we bear pain courageously; we keep it in our awareness, using it as an opportunity for an honest exploration of our own soul; we share it with God and with those who love us, with friends and counselors, who understand and support us, and so deepen our intimacy. When we love ourselves, we expect that the difficulties we experience will carve in us a place for a new self-understanding to emerge, we expect that our suffering will lead to the discovery of a new, less painful way of being. To the degree that we have been betrayed or lonely, to that degree, we can come to appreciate the love and companionship of a trusted friend. To the degree that we have suffered a loss, to that degree we can come to appreciate and thank God for all we have been given. Jesus did not come to do away with our pain. He did not come to explain it. He came only to fill it with his presence, so that through this therapeutic process of suffering, we might find life and be healed.

So first, knowing that God is a God of love, and that you are God’s beloved child, love yourself. Accept yourself and, in the love of God, move continuously toward emotional health and abundance.

2. Now secondly, when we consider loving those right in front of us, it’s important to talk about loving our spouses, family members, and friends—our inner circle of intimacy. Certain biblical practices are foundational to loving those close to us and are central to your Christian identity as a loving person. These practices are given to us by God because sometimes it’s hard to love the one who is closest to you.

a. **Respect**. Love begins with respect, our ability to accept the inherent value and worth of the person right in front of us, the people who are closest to you. As Christians, respect for others is grounded in the affirmation that all people are God's children, created uniquely in God's image and loved unconditionally by God. Respect involves discovering some quality or ability to esteem in the other. It may be that your spouse is a good parent, or writes beautiful music, or it maybe you admire your friend’s professional competence, or appreciate the way she or he takes care of herself or himself. Respect also involves the recognition of the other's autonomy, his or her need for solitude and privacy. Intimate relationships are not necessarily ones in which people do everything together. Some people do not need relationships in the same way that other people do. Some people may not require as much "togetherness" as others to feel close. People in intimate relationships are able to stand apart from their loved ones and admire them, to enjoy the realization that they are connected with spouses who are beautiful and gifted, whether they are present or not. Respect for abilities, autonomy and privacy cultivates intimacy.

b. **Tolerance**. Two persons in an intimate marriage or a dear friendship are tolerant of each other. They recognize themselves as fallible, vulnerable human beings and therefore can accept each other's shortcomings. An important practice of loving relationships is forgiveness. As Christians we forgive, because we have been forgiven. God has accepted us, fallible and finite as we are, warts and all, and so we ought also to forgive and deem others as acceptable and justified ("just as if they had not sinned"). Dietrich Bonhoeffer concludes his "Wedding Sermon from a Prison Cell" with these words, "In a word, live together in the forgiveness of your sins, for without it no human fellowship, least of all a marriage, can survive. Don't insist on your own rights, don't blame each other, don't judge or condemn each other, but accept each other as you are, and forgive each other every day from the bottom of your hearts."

c.  **Communication**. Intimate marriages and great friendships depend on open, honest communication, on the willingness to risk a genuine encounter. No two people agree on everything. Conflict is inevitable in any relationship. Through communication, by talking through our differences, conflict can lead us to deeper intimacy and friendship. Open communication allows us to better understand one another, and not make guesses about the other person’s motives. Great communication allows us to negotiate middle ground, to come to agreement on common goals and to make progress toward those goals. Also, no relationship remains static. Over time, we change. Change requires that we keep working on our relationships, keep talking about our thoughts and feelings until the day we die. Sometimes words or actions once considered loving are no longer perceived as such. We learn new things. We meet new people. We experience new feelings. Intimacy depends on clear, honest communication about our lives through time.

d. **Trust**. Trust is based on a commitment to faithfulness through time (fidelity and continuity). It is difficult to build intimacy and friendship in a climate where one or both people are open to an easy dissolution of the relationship when things go bad. Trust is the confidence that we will keep our promises "to stay in this thing together" no matter what crises, conflicts or challenges come along.

e. **Transcendence**. There is a sense of mystery at the center of intimate marriages and true friendships. It involves a sense of awe at the complexity of our loved ones, a sense that while we may know them better than we know anyone, we sometimes feel that we hardly know them at all. It involves our bafflement before love, before its profound passion and depth, on the one hand, and its sometimes sudden, wrenching disappearance, on the other hand. Above all, it involves a deep sense of gratitude to God, for bringing into each of our lives this one who knows us, cares for us and incarnates so much of what God desires to do for us, so much of what makes us whole.

3. Now finally, beyond loving ourselves and our most intimate circle of friends and loved ones, who is there, standing right in front of us whom we can love? Where do we start? There are so many people in the world who need to be loved, there are so many causes, so many non-profits clamoring for our attention and support.

Well, first of all, there are the people we come across every day: Boot Ranch employees, if you’re working, your colleagues at work, could be your barber or the person who cuts your grass. Andrea is great at this, if someone comes to our home to do work for us, she talks with them and often engages with them to help them build their business, to help them financially, to help them become an American citizen, and most importantly, to help them with their personal problems and personal growth. And then she stays with them for as long as they want to stay engaged, sometimes for decades.

Another very important way to focus your love is by having a mission or a purpose for your life, for your marriage, or among your friends. It could be serving meals-on-wheels, reading for the blind, working for a political party, working as a hospital volunteer, working with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, supporting disabled veterans or serving as a Sunday School teacher.

Many times, throughout my career, people have asked me, “How do I find my purpose or mission?” Sometimes your purpose emerges out of a talent or skill that God has given you (music, teaching, being persuasive, being a good manager). Many other people find their purpose by reflecting on the difficulties and tragedies they have personally experienced and based on that, taking action to help others who face similar circumstances.

There was a couple in my church in St. Paul who experienced such a horrible tragedy. Their 32-year-old son killed himself with a shotgun in his parent’s home, just as his mother walked into the room. He had been in medical school, got sick, and was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer, for which, at the time, there was no cure. The course of the disease was terribly painful. So, he decided to end his life. At the time of his death, his parents knew nothing about the cancer; they were devastated by the loss and particularly, for the mother, by what she had witnessed. I wondered if they would ever recover. But later, when they found out about the pancreatic cancer, they did everything they could to learn about it. They talked to the doctors at the Mayo Clinic and discovered there was some promising research. They decided to dedicate their lives to finding ways to support this work. They started a foundation and, in the years ahead, they raised millions of dollars, which led to advances in the treatment of this disease, particularly when it’s caught early. Through their tragedy, this couple found a purpose, and they impacted many lives through their love.

Then there’s the story of Bill George. Bill was a young man just starting business school when he met the love of his life. They got engaged, but about a month before the wedding, she got a terrible headache that wouldn’t go away. The doctor ran tests and told them that she had an inoperable cancerous brain tumor and only about six months to live. They decided to get married and Bill loved and took care of her for many months, until she died. Five years later, Bill met a wonderful woman, they fell in love, and were married. After two years she got cancer, and Bill supported her through several years of treatment, when her cancer went into remission, never came back and she was restored to full life and health. As Bill reflected on this experience, his purpose in life became clear. One night he wrote down this simple sentence, “I exist to restore people to full life and health.”

Well, it turns out that Bill was a great businessman. He rose up through the ranks of several companies until one day, about 25 years ago, he was asked to be the CEO of Medtronic, a medical technology and equipment company based in Minnesota. At that time Medtronic was valued at about $4 billion.

The first day, Bill met with his Board of Directors. At the beginning of the meeting, he asked the Board a question, “We’re worth $4B. What if this afternoon someone came to us and offered us $6B? Would you take it? Yes, or No? Board members wrote their answers on slips of paper. Bill tallied up the vote and it was unanimous. “You all said that you would sell the company,” he said. “And because of that, I QUIT!” They all shouted, “Wait! Wait! Wait!” Bill responded, “I took this job because my mission in life is to restore people to full life and health” (and he told them the story of his first and second wife). “I believe that the world needs a company like Medtronic with that mission, and I know that if we make this the mission of our company, ‘We exist together to restore people to full life and health,’ that within 10 years, $4B will be for us a distant memory.” Well, the Board agreed and ten years later, the value of Medtronic was $64B. How Bill led that company, the love he had for the people his company served, changed many lives.

* The Mission and the Medallion (every employee had one on their desk)
* The Mission on Posters (Ubiquitous throughout the company)
* The Mission in the Operating Room (Technicians who gave surgeons permission to close)
* The Mission in Company Meetings (bearing witness to the mission in every meeting)

And so, this is the Word of God for us today: Because you are loved by God, love the one right in front of you: love yourself, love your family and friends, love those who happen to come across your path, and love those you meet and serve through your personal mission. We love, because God first loved us.