

GETTING LOVE

1 Corinthians 13; Jeremiah 1: 4-10

What's the most important thing you can do in life? What's the most important thing you can get in life? People spend a lot of money getting things. People spend many years working on things and practicing things. People put a lot of time, attention and focus learning things, developing things and perfecting things. But have they found the most important thing? Have you?

The apostle Paul says that it's all about love. That's the most important thing. Now, even though many of us know something about love, do we really understand love? Is there something about love we can get here in church we may not get elsewhere the same? And if so, will this make a life-giving difference for us?

Our reading from Corinthians is, perhaps, the best known passage in all of scripture. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol... Love is patient; love is kind... And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." Some of us have heard these words many times. But do we really understand them? Why does the apostle speak them and what do they mean?

Well, the Corinthians live in a world that is very much like our world in some basic ways. It's all about achievement. It's all about possessing, acquiring, competing, winning and showing it off. It's all about money and status, the way you look, the group you belong to, achievements that are measurable and valued on the world's tangible terms.

The church's version of this is about morality and spirituality. How good and righteous are you? How spiritually mature are you? What are tangible measures of moral and spiritual status and maturity? For the Corinthians it's all about tongue speaking, spiritual knowledge, prophetic insight and wisdom, great sacrifices of money and volunteer service.

But what does all this do in the world and in the church? It makes some feel really special and important. It makes them feel admired and valuable. Their sense of self is defined by how highly they are esteemed by those around them. But then there are those who don't achieve much and haven't made much. Whether they've tried and failed or whether they just don't have what it takes, comparative and competitive measurements of value make some people feel really great and some people feel really lousy about themselves.

Well, Paul says, the results of your achievement priorities and the results of your spiritual priorities reveal just how out of sync you are with true love as Jesus has revealed it. Some of you seem to have it all. But you know what? In truth, you have nothing. You have nothing because you have lost the most important thing of all – love. And you know what? The very things you are after get in the way of love. Focussing so much energy on yourself, your security, your well-being, your everything... it gets in the way of loving others.

To love others, you need to be open to them, you need to be patient with them which means giving them time and attention. You need to listen, really listen, with compassion in your heart. You need to give people the benefit of the doubt rather than mistrust them, judge them, dismiss them or put them down. You need to take the time to weep with them in their troubles and rejoice with them in their joys. All of this takes time, energy and focus. Being swallowed up in yourself and your own concerns and needs can be a major obstacle to love.

So then: unless you've recognized that love is by far the most important thing you can get in life and the most important thing you can cultivate in your life, you cannot possibly experience the blessing of God. That's the first thing the apostle is declaring in this passage.

But second, he is saying throughout his letter to the Corinthian Christians, that you can't just get love by willing it or buying it or choosing it by some effort. You can do all kinds of loving things towards others. But to feel love inside? That's a whole other matter. To feel the love so that there is real joy, fullness and peace inside you... That's a whole other gift that you need to get. Unless you realize that love is an experience before it is an expression, that love is a feeling deep inside which grows as you share it and extend yourself outward... unless you know this deep inside and get the energy from that place, love will just be a lot of work with limited benefits.

We'll never get enough praise, acknowledgement or gratitude from others to satisfy our ego needs if love doesn't grow from within us. To be patient and kind... to resist envy, boasting, arrogance, rudeness, irritability and resentment... to resist agitating for things having to go your way... to resist getting gratified when others you don't like get what's coming to them... To be able to carry good energy in hardship, to believe in people, to have hope for good things even in the midst of bad, to endure some negativity and still be open to others... Wow! How can we do any of this, even a little, unless love is an energy flowing from within rather than just an effort of willpower or duty?

So how do we get this kind of love? How do we get love that lives on the inside and grows outward? Well, there are two basic ways.

One way is through other people? When we are loved we are able to love. This is important. It's important because it's not something we can control. We are dependent at a fundamental level. To be deprived of love makes it that much harder for us to love others from the heart rather than as a duty or as an effort of our will. The love that grows inside us outward is a seed that flowers only as we experience love flowing into us. And love doesn't flow into us because we achieve, earn or can demonstrate our attractiveness and worth. No. When we are loved for simply being who we are, the seed in us begins to flower and the more it flowers, the more we have love to pass on to the world around us.

But there's more. And this is where church comes in. Not only is church a place where we can practice love with one another and experience love from one another. No. Church is also a place where we open ourselves in worship, prayer, praise, reflection and silent meditation to the source of love itself who is God. We are here to receive first and only as we receive what we cannot give to ourselves, do we have something genuine and real to share when it comes to love. The joy we experience in loving, the fullness, the purpose, the peace... it can only happen when love is growing inside us and not when it's simply something we do on the outside in terms of what people see. We have to feel it inside. God can give it to us. God wants to give it to us if we believe the revelation of Jesus in the scriptures. But we need to find ever new ways in ourselves to open up to this powerful source of energy which is God's love.

So we come here and learn how to open up to receive the love of God. And as we receive, we share. And if the receiving is powerful enough, we share love even past the obstacles we meet in the people we try to love who aren't easy for us to love for any number of reasons. To love others even when it's not easy to love them, that requires an inner energy flow we cannot give to ourselves.

And this brings me to my final point – the obstacles to love. Why is it that we fail to love? Why is it that we fail to experience the fullness and joy that comes from loving? We can blame God. But blaming God is like blaming a tap with clean running water which we cannot access because we don't get a glass for ourselves to drink it. Is it the tap's fault or the water's fault or our fault? Getting a glass is like opening our heart. We need to act for it to happen.

Sometimes we don't want to love certain people. We hold a grudge against them and resist the flow of love. Why? We need to prayerfully examine ourselves. That's why confession is part of worship early on. God's call to love which is gospel can only be heard and inwardly received if we are open in heart to receive it and allow it to grow from the inside out.

Sometimes, the obstacles are the experiences of life that have wounded us somehow and shut us down to the transforming power of love. We've been neglected, mistreated or

betrayed. Maybe we've suffered trauma or abandonment somehow. We've been hurt by someone to whom we had given our heart. Mistrust, suspicion and cynicism is our first move, not openness. So then, the therapy of worship and church fellowship is to begin to build trust again. It is to begin to open our hearts again. It is to begin to hear God calling us to a relationship of communion with God which could then begin to open us to the possibility of communion with other human beings.

And sometimes, the obstacles to love are the prejudices and attitudes we have grown up with which have influenced us. Church is a place for self-examination before God as much as a place for being challenged beyond our comfort zone in relating to others who are very different.

Jeremiah the prophet was called by God. Our reading this morning is all about him being called to be and do what was beyond him to be and do. Throughout his life as a prophet, Jeremiah is being pushed and pulled beyond his comfort zone and beyond his safety zone. He suffers a lot. He grows a lot. But there are also times where he reacts, he hates, and he prays his hate and despair. There are times where he weeps bitter and despairing tears and times he has to proclaim God's grief for Israel. The path toward loving is anything but straightforward or easy for Jeremiah.

Sometimes we love others by speaking truthfully to them even if the truth will hurt them. We cannot control whether they will accept what we say in love or react quite negatively to us. Loving someone honestly is never easy.

And then there are the circumstances of life that can push us to our limits and beyond. Our inner space for love gets crowded. We find it hard to love others because there are things about them that turn us off and turn us away. We get exhausted mentally, emotionally and physically. We are caught by feelings of loneliness, a lack of appreciation for who we are and what we do. We feel taken for granted for all our efforts to love.

My friends, God knows it's not easy. Christ's call to love cost him his life. Paul's call to love cost him his life too. But when it's true love the experience is that of joy and fullness in the giving. It is the experience of peace in the serving, growing trust in the sharing. Unless we are replenished anew, it won't be love we have to share and it won't be love we are experiencing.

May God find each of us wherever we are in our lives right now. May we experience a greater opening of our hearts, a cleansing and renewing of our hearts. May we experience a new sense of call to God's mission to love the world through us; Amen.