

## THE SPIRIT & ENERGY OF LOVE

Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27

Another year of school had begun. Diana was in her final year of high school. She had spent her whole summer at camp. Already it felt like so long ago. Camp was connected to her Christian faith. She felt totally at home there. She was loved and loved for who she was. What she wore, how many friends she had, what she had achieved, whether she had a boyfriend or whatever way she went... none of that mattered when she was at camp. It was all about love. And even though there was always drama going on at camp, love always won out in the end.

But school? That was different. Her school friends, like her, had to contend with all kinds of challenges. They were only a week into school and Diana's friend Sandy was already back into her self-pity mode. Everyone else had it better than Sandy. They had better parents, better summers, better looks, more friends, better grades... For all Diana's efforts to help Sandy appreciate the half-glass that was full, Sandy always ended up absorbed in the half-glass that was empty. For all the love Diana had felt over the summer, being with Sandy could bring her down. Besides this, Sandy could get so absorbed with herself that Diana could never find the space to share her own struggles, her own passions and her own fears.

Then there was Diana's other friend Brenda. Brenda also had issues but they were different than Sandy's. Brenda's issues had to do with her self-esteem. She always felt she was inadequate, too fat, too ugly, not smart enough and not someone others wanted to be with. Maybe it was her camp and faith experience that made her reach out as she did, but Diana felt committed to trying to help Brenda see herself the way God saw her – as a beautiful child of God full of possibility and worth. But unless Brenda could see herself that way and believe that way, nothing would change. Brenda loved Diana because Diana genuinely cared about her and made her feel better about herself. But then there were others around her and through social media too, who showed up Brenda's inadequacies and deficiencies. As much as Diana gave to Brenda, Brenda was too consumed by her self-loathing to give much back to Diana.

Then there was Pat. Pat did not suffer from self-pity or self-loathing. In fact, she thought she was awesome. In fact, she thought she was so awesome that she spent much of their conversations sharing with Diana all the followers she had and all the friends who wanted some of her attention and time. It's like Pat had an insatiable hunger to be adored. She was totally absorbed with herself. After a whole summer where Diana experienced so much love given and received, being with Pat too much could bring Diana down. Pat lived in her own world for all the so-called followers she had. She was so immersed in her world she had no inner space to pay attention to anyone else or appreciate the beauty and wonder of anyone else.

Already a week into school and Diana felt like she needed a new environment and a different group of friends. But she also realized how much Brenda, Pat and Sandy were typical in

terms of what they were going through and how that isolated them from real friendship and real love. They were all living in their own bubbles, totally self absorbed with self-pity, self-loathing or self-promotion. How could Diana find a way to connect that kept her summer camp experience alive through the school year? What was it about her camp experience that made her want something different?

The apostle Paul could relate to Diana. Even though He didn't have summer camp, the apostle had tasted something in Christian community that made him want something better. Many of the Corinthian Christians were like Diana's friends: Sandy, Brenda and Pat. They all wanted love, but they went about it all wrong. The more they fought to claim love for themselves, the more they isolated themselves, pushed each other away, leaving them feeling empty and unfulfilled. Some thought they were amazing and they were hungry for attention and praise – look how awesome I am! Others felt inadequate and awful about themselves given that they didn't have the gifts, the looks, the popularity and the success. And then there were those who always felt hard done by and who always saw how others had it so much better than they.

In response, Paul offers them a very different vision. Paul's vision is all about love and what true love in relationship is all about. But where does the inspiration and energy of true love come from? For Paul it is all about Christ. Christ is Spirit and Christ is energy and Paul imagines the whole network of people in relationship in the church as a body – the body of Christ. When church really works, it is the body of Christ and it is Christ as Spirit and energy that inspires true love as the connector.

Jesus is like the head and the heart of the body. The rest of us who are connected to Christ are like the parts of the body. To the degree that we are connected to our head and heart, we are very much part of the body and have a distinctive and necessary function as part of the body. If we are disconnected from our head and heart, we die inside and undermine the healthy functioning of the body. Without the Christ spirit in us energizing us, the love we feel inside withers and dies as the brutalities of life around us push up against us. The question is, will the body function as a healthy whole or will the body be corrupted by the sinful toxins of the world around?

“Well, Paul,” the Corinthians could ask, “What are those sinful toxins?” Here's what Paul says: “If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body.” Now why would the foot or the ear say that about themselves? Why do we put ourselves down, feel inadequate or feel hard done by? Because we have absorbed the negative toxins of our world. There are constantly things around us and people too who contribute to us feeling bad about ourselves or sorry for ourselves. This undermines love in that we cannot feel connected to people when we experience self-loathing and self-pity. The values of the world around us eat into us in terms of how we feel about ourselves. We become absorbed with ourselves and isolated as a result.

But the apostle adds something more. He says: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ So why would the eye and the head say such things to the hand and the feet? Because they feel superior and because they are promoting their own importance and value over against others. The world around us is not only a place where we can be made to loathe ourselves, feel inadequate or hard done by. The world is also a highly competitive place where our very value and worth as human beings is dependent on how much better, more popular, beautiful, successful and worthy we are for praise, attention and ultimately love. What pressure to promote ourselves! And if everyone is so busy having to promote themselves over against each other, who has the inner space and heart to actually admire and love each other? What a terrible foundation for love and what a terrible understanding of what love actually is!

And so, Paul counters such toxic and destructive attitudes and thoughts with what true love is when Christ is the spirit and the energy. First, over against the idea that we are to be loved only as we are superior, more beautiful, successful and popular than others, true love that is Christ energy functions in a totally opposite way. Thinking of the image of the body, Paul says this: “the members of the body that seem weaker are treated as indispensable, those members that could be thought of as less honourable are clothed with greater honour, and those that can be thought of as less respectable are treated with greater respect.” In other words, as human beings we find our value, our worth and real love when we are transformed by Christ’s spirit and energy to love so that others are lifted up. As they are lifted up we are lifted up and together we are part of something special – the body of Christ. Cutting others down or competing against them for a limited portion of love is a zero sum game that leaves us all starving for love in the end. Loving one another by being attentive to each other and lifting each other up opens up infinite space for love to flow like blood through the whole network of relationships that make up the body.

Finally, the apostle offers one more key to unlocking the door to true love. He says this: “God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.” In other words, the apostle is saying that rather than clamouring to get to the top of whatever ladder we may want to climb, paying attention to those who cannot climb any ladder and helping them climb or staying with them at the bottom, is actually the true way to get to the top. Being there for others and caring for others, creating space in ourselves for others because we are not totally absorbed in ourselves; whether it’s our problems and issues or our need to feel on top, in the end we only isolate ourselves and choke off the very love we’re after. Only as we genuinely turn to each other do we also find our own individual fullness as children of God and members of Christ’s body.

OK. Awesome insights. Very inspiring. But how can all this gospel insight help Diana? Well, Diana needs to find the kinds of relationships in her life that counter what’s she’s encountering in school and in the world. She needs to get connected to the body of Christ wherever she can find it so that she feed on the spirit and energy of true love who is Christ. Diana needs to be loved for who she is, and she needs to be with people who have space

and energy to love her and treasure the unique person she is as she is, not only as she have something of value the world values. Diana needs to be able to share her gifts without being evaluated in a competitive environment. She needs to be recognized in all her unique and distinctive beauty compared to no one else but herself and before no one else but God who embraces her as infinitely beautiful for all her flaws and imperfections.

This is what the church can and should be. We here at Armour Heights church are called to be the body of Christ. We are called to see each other and treat each other as members of the same body, worthy of infinite love, lifting each other up and making space in our hearts for each other for all our flaws and imperfections. We only grow and become better when we are loved, not put down in competitive criticisms and evaluations. We experience love inside as we share love on the outside. We don't have to earn love to be loved. We experience love as we love others and give them opportunity to love us back.

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” Let us live the love we are called to be and as members of the body of Christ, let us contribute to the body as a whole so that each of us may find abundance and sustenance all year round.

Let us pray: We need you, O Christ, as spirit and energy and the renewing power of true love... Amen.