

MOTIVATION

1 Corinthians 13

What motivates you in life? What motivates you to get up in the morning, go to work or do whatever it is that you do? What motivates you to call certain people, befriend them, take care of them? What motivates you to pursue the activities you do and the interests you have?

There are many different things that motivate us. There is money, security, comfort, pleasure. There is recognition and appreciation from others that motivates us. There is praise and adoration. There is our own sense of pride or honour that can drive us, a competitiveness or ambition to win, to succeed, to be on top. There is also our need for friendship. We need attention from others. We need to be listened to and cared for. We are motivated to create the conditions and the relationships for that to happen for us.

But what about love? What about love for God and love for others, both of which are about placing our focus beyond ourselves? How much of a motivator is that in our lives? Well, if we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that often enough, in so far as God and others are important in our lives, doing something and committing to something in that direction is more of a duty than passion. There are things in life we just have to do and that's the main motivation for it. We have responsibilities for others. Some tasks are just necessities. And there is the voice of conscience too. We 'must' do this and we 'should' do that. But is this genuine love?

Well, love is certainly one motivator and perhaps an important motivator for many of us who belong to churches. We attend church for worship when we could be doing something else. We participate, volunteer and donate to church when we could direct our time, attention and resources elsewhere. But is it love that motivates us in all this or are there other motivators too? Where does duty, necessity, social connection, and meaningful service fit into the drive and passion to love?

My goal in the remainder of this sermon is to help us journey toward greater understanding and insight. It is my belief and that of the scriptures, that as we come to understand and develop some insight, we will experience greater purification in our capacity, energy and motivation to love. For it is a firm conviction of our biblical faith that only when love is the primary motivator in life, does life find its greatest fulfillment.

Our New Testament reading is, perhaps, one of the best-known passages of the bible. It is all about love. The problem is that we often hear it read outside its context. The apostle Paul is writing about love in a highly conflicted context. The Corinthian church is divided between different people who all believe they have greater gifts than others. They are highly competitive about who's better, more spiritual, more talented, more a gift to God and others. What the apostle is trying to drill into their consciences and hearts is that their greatest passion ought to be love otherwise all their gifts of mind and spirit are destructive rather than constructive of community. Love energizes gifts in a contrary direction than other passions. In fact, as the apostle suggests in the opening verses, if we are motivated and driven, we need to ask ourselves honestly before God, what it is that is driving us?

To what extent does fear drive us? How does ambition and the need to be better than others motivate us? What about lust or greed or the need to be needed, liked and appreciated? What about the need to prove ourselves as a motivator? And what about security, money and comfort? There are many motivators that play within us and these come into conflict not only within ourselves, but they become a source of tension and conflict in our relationship with others.

What the apostle hopes to do with his letter to the congregation in Corinth is challenge them to recognize the sinister motivations functioning in many of them, driving them in such a way that they are cutting each other up rather than building each other up. And in the end, he is arguing, for all their gifts they will not achieve what they are hoping to achieve. Only love brings genuine abundance and peace. Any other motivator will undermine such abundance and peace. In fact, any other motivator is like what the ancient philosopher Plato describes as a leaky jar. We keep filling it incessantly, driven and motivated as we are, but it keeps leaking until its empty. It's a vicious cycle and there is no rest. Meanwhile the abundance and peace we're really after seems more elusive than ever.

So then, even though love may be the best motivator, we have to honestly confess that there are different motivators functioning in us. Sometimes our motivations are about necessities, responsibilities and obligations. Sometimes it's about personal needs we have or fears that create compulsions or anxieties in us. Sometimes it's about passions in us like lust and greed. Sometimes it's as basic as the need to relieve boredom or stress, so we consume for the sake of consuming.

The ancient philosopher Plato breaks down the energy behind our motivations into two basic types. First, there is what he calls "*Thymos*." *Thymos* is a more spirited, aggressive energy in us and it's focused in all ways competitive, acquisitive and

combative. It's the energy behind anger, outrage, advocacy, demanding rights. But it is also about greed, ambition and violence. *Thymos* is about assertiveness, standing up for ourselves or others, being upset and doing something about it. This is a core motivating energy. It can be a catalyst for change, but it can also be destructive. Outrage and protest because of racism or mass graves of innocent children is motivated by *Thymos*. But *Thymos* is also a motivator behind police brutality and racist violence.

The other motivating energy Plato names is what he calls "Eros." Eros is the passion of desire. And desire is drawn and attracted to beauty. But our desire for beauty can become distorted. It can turn into lust and the desire to consume, to buy, and to use another person for sheer pleasure and gratification. It's about a consuming envy of what others have. It's about the passion for another that makes us want to control them and be jealous of other relationships they may have. The passion of desire and the passion of assertiveness are two core energies that motivate us at a profound level.

But what direction are we driven by our motivations? Here Plato uses a fascinating image to help us understand ourselves. He says that our spirits are like a chariot drawn by two horses. The two horses are *eros* and *thymos*, the passion of desire and the passion of assertiveness. But the key, argues Plato, is the driver. Who is the driver? Is the driver able to control and direct the horses? Is there a clear direction? Or are the horses running out of control?

Let's isolate the issues. First, there are these energies in us, and perhaps depending on our personalities or situations in life or just the mystery of who we are, we can be driven by one or the other or both. Sometimes the energies are out of control. How many of us have had fits of rage where we have said or done things we have regretted later when we were more in control? What about compulsions in us, or as the epistle of John describes it: the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life? Our energies can be directed in all kinds of ways and sometimes they are just out of control.

Second, however, there are times when the problem is not so much energy out of control but a lack of energy altogether. People who have experienced severe depression talk about this. They have lost the energy and will to live, to do anything, to talk to anyone. They have no passion, no desire and no assertiveness in them. While many of us may not experience a full-blown depression thank God, we do know what it's like to have a loss of energy where we become apathetic, indifferent, numb, aloof,

distant from a situation, a person, even ourselves and our feelings. Short term it may be about emotional survival. Long-term, it can cause severe damage.

What the apostle is arguing is that if the chariot driver is not love but some other motivator, then here's what can happen. Our capacity to discern right from wrong, better from worse directions for our passions is distorted. Whether we use our assertiveness and outrage or our desire as our driving force, we delude ourselves into believing we are justified in what we do. We get upset at people or situations and lay into them and feel justified that justice is on our side. But we fail to realize that if we tear them down, even if we have a point to make, we have lost by the measure of love. Likewise if we justify our compulsion to buy, our obsession with certain activities, our attachment to certain people and relationships, but it's all about us and our needs not theirs, once again we have failed according to the measure of love. I can go on and on with examples but I'm sure you get the picture.

And so, the apostle is telling us right at the beginning of this incredible hymn to love, that even if we have all kinds of abilities, capacities and achievements in life but do not have clarity of discernment, wisdom and motivation that is rooted in love above all other potential motivators, we will be lost. We will never experience the abundance and peace for which God has made us.

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." It's easy to love when people are good to us, when situations are positive and promising, when life is good to us. But the apostle is talking here about love when contrary energies come at us from others, easily arousing in us motivations activated by passions other than love.

Will we continue to grow in love under such circumstances? Either love will grow strong in us or we will further delude ourselves in our self-justifications and self-deceptions. Either love will guide our passions so that we assert ourselves for genuine justice and become passionate about real beauty in others, enjoying them without consuming them, or we will misdirect our passions selfishly or destructively and perhaps eventually burn out in our passion and motivation altogether....

The apostle's words are words not just for the Christians of Corinth 2000 years ago. They are words for us as well. Will we commit ourselves anew to the way of love? And will we place our passions of assertiveness and desire in the service of love, which means restraining them in some cases and redirecting them in others? Will passion in us mean life and blessing for others or fear and devastation?

Let us pray: Fill us with your love, O God. Arouse our passion for justice and our passion for beauty. Fill us up and drive us by your love, so that others find rich blessing in our passion, and so that we ourselves rediscover our life purpose at this time of our lives; Amen.