

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, January 31, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"WHAT LOVE IS...AND IS NOT"

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

I've heard rumors that some among us watch "The Bachelor." Well OK, I'll admit to catching a few minutes of it if I'm channel surfing or if it happens to be on in our house. What a bizarre way for someone to find their life partner. No wonder most matches which happen on that program fall apart shortly after.

Now make no mistake - the Bible celebrates and upholds romantic love and its physical expression within God's boundaries. Read the Song of Solomon to discover what the Bible teaches about such love. It is God's gift to us and of course, given to fulfill God's command to "be fruitful and multiply".

But romantic love alone is never enough to build a marriage on. That's why we read all or part of 1st Corinthians chapter 13 at wedding ceremonies, especially verse 4 to the beginning of verse 8, "Love is patient and kind; it 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; love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things; love never ends." This love along with the romantic love which first draws a couple together is needed to sustain a marriage and home and family for the long haul.

Now it certainly would have surprised Paul, I think, to know that this wonderful, God-inspired passage on love is now read at marriage ceremonies. It is certainly appropriate at weddings, but it was not written for weddings. No, Paul wrote this passage to help the Corinthian church through some troubles they were experiencing. It had to do with the use or misuse of the spiritual gifts which the Holy Spirit had given to church members. The way the gifts were being used was causing strife and division in the church. And Paul was telling them that the way to overcome these problems is by living out God's greatest spiritual gift of all - the gift of love.

Paul's teaching on love is always timely. For this love really is the key to good and lasting relationships in the church, in marriage, in the home. Now defining love is always a bit elusive. Poets and musicians and others have all tried valiantly over the years to catch the somewhat elusive nature of love. But no one ever defined true love better than Paul does in 1 Corinthians 13. And Paul did this

with the help of the Holy Spirit and the vision of Jesus in mind. So Paul tells us what love is, and what love is not.

First of all, he tells us that love is a necessity. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but have not love I gain nothing."

Paul was telling the Corinthians that no matter what gifts they had, they must all be used with love. In fact to use gifts without love can cause more harm than good in the church. So love was a necessity.

It still is a necessity in the church. I can show you how this works. For example, some Christians are gifted with prophetic powers, by which Paul means the ability to teach or preach powerfully. Now that great gift can be used for strengthening and upbuilding God's people. But using this gift wrongly can leave others feeling small, as if their opinions or questions don't count. Rather than patiently helping members of the Body to a deeper understanding, people with this gift might easily overwhelm others with their verbal and intellectual skills. So this gift must be used with love.

Another example is knowledge. Some people have the gift of great Biblical knowledge. They read the Bible intensively. They flip back and forth between chapter and verse, quoting extensively and tying everything together. It's a great gift. Now every Christian ought to read and become familiar with the Bible, for it is the source-book of our faith. Yet some Christians find reading and understanding Scripture a challenge. Indeed, newcomers or those with limited knowledge are often reluctant to attend Bible studies because they fear being overwhelmed by those with superior knowledge. But this knowledge must never be a means for boosting self. It's given to some so that they may gently and patiently lead people into God's truth and unfold it for them. Knowledge must be shared in a loving way.

We can say the same about faith. Paul writes, "If I have faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I gain nothing." You know, some people say, "Oh, I had such and such an illness and I prayed in faith and God healed me." Now that can be a great witness, but it may be hard for someone who is struggling with the same disease, and also prays, but hasn't been made well. And it's easy for the latter person to think, "I guess the problem was that I didn't pray enough for myself or my loved one. I guess my faith is faulty," and they blame

themselves for what hasn't happened. So we must be careful how we talk about faith and what God accomplishes through our faith. For in response to some peoples' faith God may move a mountain, while to others he may give strength to climb it. To some he may give healing, but to another he gives strength to endure and to be a witness to God's goodness in the midst of trouble. You just never know what God will accomplish through our faith, so it's best not to boast too highly about our faith. It's God's work in any case, and he will accomplish just what is needed and what is best.

The point Paul is making is that love is a necessity in using our spiritual gifts, and if we don't use them with love, we might as well not use them at all.

Paul not only speaks about the necessity of love in the church; **he speaks of the nature of the love that is needed.** Paul's definition of love goes beyond the realm of feeling. He describes love in terms of behaviour, a way of living. Again, here is the nature of love - what it is and what it is not. "Love is patient and kind; it 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; love never ends." This love is not dependant upon feeling. You can act in this way toward those whom you don't even like on a personal level.

I can't deal with all these aspects of what love is and isn't. But here's one which seems to bedevil every organization including, the church. It's people insisting on their own way. Now in the home, you parents often have to insist on your own way with your children. That's the way of safety and protection and responsibility.

But this is the church. And when people insist on their own way the result is dissension and strife. Fellowship is broken. All this sucks the life and joy out of a church. So Paul says that it is the nature of love "not to insist on its own way." This is necessary if the Body of Christ is to function as God intends and Christian fellowship is to be maintained.

Now I think Paul would say that we should insist on God's way once we discern it or find it in Scripture. But you always have to ask yourself - is it God's way I'm insisting on or is it my own way? Too often, it can be the latter. Yes, you have your perspective and it can be a good one. But we need one another, and sometimes others have insights and wisdom that I don't have. If my voice is heard and my opinion reflected to a degree in the final decision, then I'm OK with that. I'm never going to get everything I want. But I'm OK if a group comes to a reasonable and God-honouring decision. Insist on God's way, absolutely, but don't always insist on your own way in the church. And don't be too quick to

identify your way with God's way. Scripture doesn't answer every question, you know. It doesn't tell us what colour to paint the kitchen. Sometimes you just have to find a compromise or split the difference. That's not always bad, you know. And if your way is right, then eventually your way will be embraced, not immediately perhaps, but eventually. So you may need some patience. And that too is a characteristic of love. "Love is patient... Love does not insist on its own way." That's part of love's nature which is very much needed in the church.

Paul tells us one more thing about this love. **Love never ends.** This gives us a clue as to where this love comes from. For human love can come to an end. Certainly loving feelings can end. But where does the love come from that never ends? That's right - it comes from above - from God. The love of God never ends. This love became flesh in Jesus and this love is the Spirit's greatest gift to the church.

Now the church often gives God reason to stop loving us. But he doesn't. Despite our unloveliness, our spats and disputes and our misuse of his gifts, God does not stop loving us. Thank God. And in love God has made it possible for sinners to be forgiven and transformed and to live with God forever. In love God gave his only Son to live with us and to die on the Cross, bearing our sins and shame, and to rise victoriously from the grave. And now all of us who trust in Christ shall live forever in the embrace of the love that never ends.

And it is Jesus' living presence in the church and in our lives that makes possible the love Paul speaks of. As the church clings to Jesus and lives close to Jesus the love of God in Him grows in us too. We need Jesus. We need him, not just as an example, but to really come and dwell in us and among us. If we have any hope of using our gifts in loving ways and creating the loving fellowship that God intends, then we must invite Jesus to live in our hearts and in our fellowship. He must be welcome in this place.

Jesus really is the vision and the fulfilment of Paul's words. Paul must have had Jesus in mind when he wrote this passage. For doesn't this fit him perfectly? "Jesus is patient and kind, Jesus is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Jesus does not insist on his own way; Jesus is not irritable or resentful. Jesus does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the right. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Jesus' love never ends." That love is my salvation, and yours, too. It's the salvation of the church. It's the salvation of the world.