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St. Luke's Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany -January 31, 2016
I Corinthians 13:1-13

Love...when we just hear the word love, we often become captivated because of the visceral emotion that the word evokes. During the past few weeks, the focus of our message has been on Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, and there is a good reason for this. Paul is communicating to the people of Corinth some essential messages that continue to be so valuable for each of us to today. We have looked at the importance of the spiritual gifts that each of us has been given, as pre-ordained by God, and last week we were reminded of the tremendous, and I don't use that description lightly, value that each of us have as members in the body of Christ. This is just really good stuff, or at least I believe it to be, because I think sometimes it's too easy for us to forget what an integral role we each play as members of the body of Christ.

The crux of the previous messages is rooted in love. Indeed, Paul acknowledges that the people of Corinth are well endowed in spiritual gifts, as he alluded to earlier in Chapter 1 of the epistle, and he urges them to use these gifts to seek to abound in building up the Church. Paul also makes the connection that 'love also builds up' and therefore it was as paramount in building up the church to the people of Corinth, just as it is for us today. We are called to seek to abound in loving one another.

Not too unlike today, it is often easy for us to become focused upon our gifts, often considered to be our contributions and accomplishments. When this occurs we tend to become too fixated on these matters and in doing so have failed to live love toward one another. And yet, the greatest of all needs is the need for love. Love is central to the life of faith.

At the heart of the Christian life are faith, hope and love. Paul exclaims that he cannot imagine true life in Christ without each part of this triad being in place, and fully functioning, for they are interdependent upon one another, but ultimately love is grounded in God. Without faith or hope, one is not capable of love. The right relation to God makes love possible, and therefore love presupposes faith. As I stated, they are intrinsically connected.

In order for us to love fully, we must allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Yes, vulnerable, because vulnerability is the ultimate pathway to true human connection. Well known scholar, author and researcher Brene Brown illustrates this beautifully in her book ‘Daring Greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent and lead.’ Brene has conducted years of extensive research on the topic of human connection. Through her research she discovered that the key element for human connection to occur is for a human being to experience being vulnerable. She states (quote) “When we are real/authentic then we can allow ourselves to be loved, which makes us vulnerable.” (End quote). However, the word vulnerability can often conjure up negative connotations such as weakness, fear, or inferior. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable can be counter-intuitive for many, if not most of us. But I assure you, that it is when we allow ourselves to become truly vulnerable - it is then that we become fully real. And when we allow ourselves to become fully real, we open ourselves to joy, to hope, to God’s grace and to love.

For many of us it can be a struggle to allow ourselves to be authentic and transparent. Being real just isn’t that easy! Allow me to summarize a beautiful classic story titled ‘The Velveteen Rabbit’ that I believe exemplifies the love that Paul is alluding to.

Elaborate on the rabbit given to the little boy for Christmas, all fluffy, with a pink nose and silk-lined ears. The boy got tired of it and went on to play with other toys and the rabbit felt forgotten.

While in the nursery with all of the other toys the rabbit met the wise ‘old-skinned’ horse “What is real?” Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and stick out a handle (he was referring to the polished, metal toy soldiers in the room) the skin horse responded “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real.” The rabbit then asked “Does it hurt?” The skin horse answered “sometimes.” “When you are real, you don’t mind being hurt.” Then the rabbit asked if it happens all at once, or bit by bit? “It doesn’t happen all at once” said the skin horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen too often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all; because once you are real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

In other words, being real means experiencing love and living in relationships where love is given and received. When we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, we become real, and when we are real we know what it means to love, and to be loved. As I stated in last week’s message, we are created to live in community, and in doing so we are created to experience love in and through these communities. This is what God intended and this is what God designed us for. “God is love” and as recorded in 2 Timothy 1:7, “God has not given us the spirit of fear, but the spirit of power, and of love, and of sound mind.” In less than two weeks we will begin the holy season of Lent. God sent his only Son to show us, to teach us, how to become real. May we

strive to become real by loving one another, by working closely in community, and by becoming to know better the One, the Christ, who is love incarnate.

In the loving words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

Amen.