

## **“The Greatest of These is Love”**

Date: August 30, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Theme: Love

Occasion: Virtues, series

Texts: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Philippians 2:5-8; John 13:31-35

Today we come to the conclusion of our summer series on Christian virtues. I hope you have found these conversations to be helpful and meaningful, as you strive to strengthen your Christian walk with the Lord.

In today’s lesson we hear Paul say, “The greatest of these is love.”

Several years ago on a hot August day in San Antonio, Texas a tragedy was unfolding. It was 99 degrees in the shade when a ten-month old baby girl was accidentally locked in a parked car by her aunt. Frantically, the mother and aunt ran around the locked car in near hysteria.

A neighbor attempted to unlock the car with a clothes hanger. The infant was bawling at the top of her lungs, and then began to turn purple and foam at the mouth, a combination of anxiety and the intense heat inside the car. It had quickly become a life-and-death situation.

Out of the blue, Fred Arriola, a tow-truck driver came upon the scene. Quickly sizing up the situation, he grabbed a hammer from his truck and smashed the back-side window of the car to free the baby. Was he celebrated as a hero? Apparently not.

According to an article in *the San Antonio Tribune*, he is quoted as saying, “The lady was mad at me because I broke the window. I just thought, ‘What’s more important – a baby or a window?’”

Most of the choices we make in life are not between what is trivial and what is important. Rather, most of the choices you and I have to make are usually between what is important, and what is *more* important. Today, we’re going to talk about what is *most* important.

As we gather for worship today, we affirm that the greatest blessing God has given us is God's love for us – God's love that forgives our sins and makes us children of God; God's love that brings us into a fellowship with one another; and God's love that sends us forth to proclaim the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, our Savior.

As God's people, we gather together in this congregation to affirm to one another what is MOST important for us – God's love. In John 13: 34 Jesus says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Notice what Jesus says is most important. He didn't say attending church every week. He didn't say tithing was the most important thing. He didn't say obeying all of the rules of the Bible was most important. He said, "Love one another, as I have loved you." Of all the Christian virtues, the greatest of these is love.

In the workbook on Christian virtues by Maxie and Kimberly Dunnam, which I've been using as a resource for these past seven weeks, they describe what this virtue looks like in the life of a Christian. And I appreciate their perspective.

One of the first points they make is that our love should reflect the love of Jesus. They point to the cross to emphasize this point. Jesus was obedient to God even to the point of being willing to die upon a cruel Roman cross. The cross was the event in which God acted for the redemption of humanity. It is also the paradigm for all who follow Jesus.

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, than they lay down their life for a friend." Jesus then did that for all the people of the world. Now we don't have to die on a cross to show our love.

But there is something important there we need to take notice of. This is the paradigm which Christ establishes for Christian love. The self-giving nature of Jesus becomes both the pattern and the command for us. We are to serve one another in love. Self-giving, self-sacrificing; this is the face of Christian love.

In Philippians, Paul says, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” You and I, dear friends, are called to be servants.

But if we have the mind of Christ, then our service will reflect Jesus, who humbled himself. Not many of us want to be servants like that, do we? Most of the time, we choose when, where, how and whom we will serve. We stay in charge.

When we serve in the style of Jesus, we give up the right to be in charge. We empty ourselves; we become vulnerable. We humble ourselves; we give up control. When we have the mind of Christ, love becomes the power for our actions and our attitudes. Then we lose our fear of being stepped on, or manipulated, or taken advantage of. We do what we do because this is what Jesus would do.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul claims that love is greatest of all – greater even than hope or faith. Paul praises faith and hope, but his point is clear – Love is of more value than these. That is because love is an action word.

Love is an active, not a passive verb. It’s not just thinking something, or feeling something; it’s *doing* something! For many of us, love has been turned into a mushy feeling that we associate with romance or get confused

with lust. But love, as understood by both Jesus and Paul, love demands *doing* the next loving thing. We *take the action* of love.

And that is why love is greater than faith or hope. Hope is largely passive. We can sigh and wish and long for something to happen, and we can wait for it with varying degrees of patience. But still, hope is passive.

Much can be said about faith. We can believe in something with all of our heart and soul, but unless that faith issues in a changed life and a transformed soul, that faith is shallow.

But look at love. Love is hope in action. Love is faith in action. We cannot say that we love without acting on that love any more than God could say He loved us without demonstrating that love in the person of Jesus Christ.

So what kind of action does love produce? Jesus taught us clearly: Love is feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, providing clothes to the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting those in prison. It's bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the broken-hearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives, and giving sight to the blind.

*And* all other acts which are similar in nature. Jesus' love for us was love in action. Jesus' demand on us is that we love one another as he has loved us. It is *that* love which surpasses as else.

As we move into this next election cycle, I want to say a few words about how love will influence the behavior of Christians, as we listen to the candidates, and as we talk to one another. As Christians, we have deeply held beliefs and values. Sometimes, though, we don't always see eye to eye. How should *love* influence how we speak to one another, and how we advocate for our particular candidate?

I like the way Maxie Dunnam and his daughter Kimberly put it in their

workbook, written over twenty years ago. I quote: “The truth we need to remember is that we can be right – and yet act wrongly. We can be so intent on preserving our rightness, our values, that we fail to love. When being right and being on the right side becomes our driving passion, it is easy to forget the heart of the gospel....Our primary task as Christians is not to [make the case for the rightness of our cause]. But to witness to the gospel, which has love at its core.”

If we lose sight of our basic Christian virtue, the thing that is most important, we do great damage to our Christian witness. I find it very helpful to keep returning to the description which Paul uses in 1 Corinthians, to evaluate myself and how I am thinking, speaking and behaving. He says:

“Love is patient and kind. It does not envy, does not boast and it is not proud. Love is not rude; it is not self-seeking; it is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.”

I want you to try an experiment. I want you to open your Bible to 1 Corinthians 13 and find verses 4-7. Everywhere you see the word love, or its pronoun “it,” substitute your own name there. Read it aloud. Listen to how it sounds. Is it true? Do you need to make some changes in your life?

“Bob is patient and kind. Bob does not envy; Bob does not boast; Bob is not proud.” If, when you read that out loud, you recognize places where this isn’t true about you, God is gently asking you to change. How do I know this? Because God is calling us to be like Himself. God is love.

Of all the Christian virtues, the greatest of these is love. May we grow in the likeness of Christ, who first loved us. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from *The Workbook on Virtues and the Fruit of the Spirit*, by Maxie Dunnam and Kimberly Dunnam Reisman, Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998, pp. 105-111.