

**Sermon: Where Love Dwells** Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4: 21-30

We heard last week that we all have gifts and talents to offer the church, given to us by the Spirit. And we heard that the gifts we should strive for more than others are those of apostleship, prophecy and teaching. But Paul goes on today to say, “there is something even better!” Then we hear the words so often read at weddings as a kind of hymn to love. But what this is, is a sermon, and a very pointed one at that. Paul is telling this community of quarrelling Christians that if they can’t quit their squabbling and act out of love for one another, then all their gifts aren’t worth a thing. It doesn’t matter how talented they are, how many of them speak in tongues, how wise or how generous or whatever...if they do not love each other the way God loves them, then it’s all for nothing.

What came to mind as I read this passage was a series of images of people I have known in my life-time: people who name themselves Christians but are quarrelsome, complaining, bitter and negative, who delight in sharing bad news with others and passing on the most vicious and destructive gossip. And I have also known many people who are *not* Christians who act in such a loving manner to those around them that they provide a wake-up call to all of us who think of ourselves as witnesses to Christ’s love. How loving are we really? That is the challenge Paul gives to us. If love is what we are to strive for, then how are we doing? What would Paul say to us, if he were to come into our congregation this Sunday?

There’s a song we used to sing when I was at university, a Taize chant: *Ubi caritas et amor, ubi caritas deus ibi est - where charity and love are, there also is God. Where there is charity and love, there God dwells.* Love is difficult, sometimes, to talk about, because the same word is used for everything from lust, to liking, to passion, to compassion, to mild pleasure. But what that song brings together is two words for love: *amor* and *caritas*. In the original Greek, the word used for love is *agape*, meaning a deep and self-giving love for God and humanity. In the Latin Bible, the word is *caritas*, which the King James’ version of the Bible translates as “charity” - a wonderful old word that I want to reclaim for us this morning. You see, I looked that word up in the dictionary to see how it was defined, and discovered that it echoes very clearly the description of love we find in Paul’s letter.

The first definition is “Christian love for God and others” - exactly what the Greek word *agape* expresses, and our reading today elaborates. The next are what we usually think of when we hear the word charity: “an act or feeling of generosity”; then “the giving of aid to the poor”; then “an institution engaged in relief of the poor or other good works”; and then a final one: “leniency in judging others”. That last one especially is interesting to me. I couldn’t help asking some questions of myself, and of this congregation. Are we charitable in our love? Are we loving in our charity? The two are closely intertwined for me.

Charity - the giving of money or other good works to benefit those who are not as fortunate as we - is love in action; it is something we do because God has first loved us. It is a way of showing our gratitude for God’s love in our lives, a way of showing that love to others. But our charity is sometimes not very charitable, not very loving: it can be grudging, resentful, keeping tally of those who deserve what they get and those we think do not; it can be showy - we insist on our names on a plaque or on a stained-glass window, we want people to know how generous we’ve been; it can be irritable and resentful, when someone we have given to does something we see as unworthy or wasteful. We sometimes judge those to whom we are giving, judge them often without knowing much at all about who they are and why it is that

they have found themselves in need of help.

All of those may be natural human reactions - but they are what Paul has warned us against. Charity is Christian love in action and Christian love demands more than what is natural or merely human. Christian love asks us to love as God loves us. Our love, our charity, is not supposed to be boastful or resentful or grudging or impatient. Our love is not to keep any record of wrongs. It is supposed to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.

Boy, is that difficult! To love even in the face of betrayal, to give without asking if the recipient is deserving, to act in a loving manner even to those who have hurt us, even to those who have let us down, even to those who have done nothing to earn it. How on earth do we do that? Paul doesn't help us out much with that. He just says, pursue love, for it is the greatest gift, above prophecy, apostleship, teaching, faith or hope. Love never ends.

I don't have any easy answers to offer, either. I know this: that though we may feel angry, or resentful, or hurt, or betrayed, we have a choice as to whether or not to act on those emotions. We have a choice to clutch those emotions to us, or to acknowledge them, and then let them go. It is not an easy choice, ever, for it means going beyond love as an emotion, and learning to love as a way of being, as a choice made daily and repeatedly. Scripture tells us that God loves us this way: that despite hurt and anger and betrayal, God chooses to love us. And Jesus lived this kind of love, even asking forgiveness for those who tortured and murdered him, choosing love instead of hate. *I don't know how to love like that, how to choose like that in spite of all that may be done to us by others. But Jesus does.* And if we open ourselves up to Jesus, if we let his love for us be the single most powerful force in our lives, then we might, too, learn how to love.

In this life of faith we are as children, toddlers tottering around on our chubby little legs: when we're hungry we demand to be fed; when we have toys we don't want to share them; when someone hits us we want to hit back. We are gazing through a cracked and wavy mirror, unable to see our way through to this life of love. And I wonder if it is partly because some of us have never known that kind of love directed to us: have never truly experienced agape, caritas, unconditional love. Not from our parents, not from our friends, not from our spouses or children, and perhaps, not even from God. Perhaps we have always felt that we had to deserve God's love: that we could never really be worthy of it.

For those of you who feel that way, I want to remind you of the words I spoke to you a few weeks ago: God knows you - has known you since before you were born; God has called you and named you beloved, dearest children; God has sent Jesus to show you the way to where love dwells, and God is with you as you try to walk the path of faithfulness. Imagine a mother, kneeling anxiously and expectantly a few feet from her child as her little one takes his first faltering steps toward her; imagine a father gleefully embracing his child and whirling her around the room in joy and pride at her accomplishment. That is how God sees us: as children who are making our faltering way to God, taking baby steps, stumbling, and falling, but still trying to learn how to walk this way of love that leads us closer to God's love. And God rejoices with each little step, each little accomplishment, each moment in which we are able to love as we have been loved. And God continues to love us, even when we falter.

We have declared that the mission of Gordon United Church is to deepen our connection with

God, ourselves and each other, and to grow in our capacity to love as Jesus loved. We try to do that through service to the community, study and prayer, through caring and supporting one another, by covenanting together to be respectful and appropriate in our communication and our governance, in how we budget and how we use our building.

As we think about the year behind us, and look at the year to come, let us Strive for love, as Paul says. Remember how God has loved us, hold on to that love, and keep on walking the way. Keep focussed on how much we are loved, and how we are loved, and seek to love others that same way: patiently, kindly, tolerantly, generously. Let the love of Jesus live in you, for where love and charity abide, there also is God. Thanks be to God. Amen.