

In the End, There is Love

January 28, 2007

1 Corinthians 13: 1 – 12; Luke 4: 21 - 30

In the end, there is love.
God is love, says 1 John, and those who love know God.
Love never ends, says Paul.

On the day that passenger planes flew into the World Trade towers
in New York city, many frantic people trapped in the burning towers
phoned the people they loved and left messages.
Many of them knew their chances of surviving were small
and they wanted to connect one more time'
to leave one final message.
The words they spoke were words of love –
love and encouragement and support and care.
Words of love for wives and husbands, for children,
for parents and partners.
In the end, when death was very real, there was love.

Thank goodness we aren't faced with the reality of death very often.
But when we are pushed to the edge,
when we are forced to think about dying
or the loss of people we care about,
that is when the things of ultimate importance become clear.
At that point, the possessions we have accumulated mean little.
The degrees we have earned,
the salary we pull in,
the talents we have honed
hardly seem to matter.
What matters, in the end, is the people we love,
and the difference we have made in lives.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about spiritual gifts.
His words about the gift of love are some of the best-known words of the bible.
Often they are read as part of a wedding ceremony
but a couple in love wasn't Paul's original audience.
Paul addressed these words to a congregation, a congregation struggling to be whole,
and that's how I invite you to hear them today.
Love is the ground of meaning, Paul says.
"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 move 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 do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Love is the ground of meaning.
In the end, there is love.
Take a moment to step back and ask why we do something.
Can we say, “I am doing this for love and in love?”
When we come to worship,
when we place our offering on the table,
when we welcome a stranger or greet a friend,
when we attend a meeting or bake a pie or make a phone call
is it love that is our motive?
Is it love that is our goal?

There is a lot of talk about love
in the culture around us.
After the post-Christmas sales end,
the valentines, chocolates and flowers come out.
Romantic comedies and television dramas
tell crazy stories about unlikely people falling in love
and – eventually – living happily ever after.
With its focus on selling things, however,
our culture has little to say about the formation of character,
the shaping and nurturing of people who are capable –
not of romantic trysts
but of self-giving, generous love for others.

Paul paints a picture of the love he means:
“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.”
Now remember, Paul is talking to a congregation
about their behaviour toward one another.
This isn’t romantic love.
This kind of love is not a matter of feelings;
this kind of love demands a committed practice.
The qualities of this list – patience, kindness, truthfulness, generosity of spirit –
these qualities aren’t ones that we simply pluck from the air!
It takes time and effort to grow such character.
We have to learn things like patience
or how not to keep score of wrongs done against us.

They aren't innate behaviours.
They are learned.
They are nurtured and encouraged.
We do this in our families
but we need to also do it in our congregations
because loving behaviour must be cultivated over time
within a community that models and supports such behaviour.
We need the community's example for our children.
We need it, also, for ourselves
because love is something that we learn our whole life long.

Rachel Remen tells the story of a little girl named Immy who, at three years of age, needed surgery to repair the hole in her heart and a badly formed heart valve. Immy had been followed since birth at the New York Hospital where many of the pediatricians knew her and her family. Despite her physical difficulties, Immy took possession of all the hearts around her. When the time came for her surgery, her parents, who were an older couple, were deeply anxious. These were early days for many cardiac surgery techniques and there were many risks, but without surgery, Immy would not survive childhood. Rachel met with them before the surgery. They were committed and ready and very pale. After the intake, they went to the children's ward. Immy greeted everyone with her wonderful smile. She was holding a new teddy bear. Someone had put a white bandage across its chest.

Rachel examined Immy carefully and listened to the erratic beat of her heart. Helping her dress, the doctor noticed a Saint Christopher medal pinned to her tiny pink undershirt. "What is this?" asked the doctor. Hesitantly, Immy's mother explained that a family member had made a special trip to Rome to have the medal blessed and then dipped into the healing waters at Lourdes. "We feel that it will protect her," the mother said simply and her husband nodded. Rachel was touched.

Over the next couple of days, Immy underwent tests. The medal had been moved from her shirt to her hospital gown. It seemed so important to her parents that Rachel mentioned it in passing to the cardiac surgery resident the evening before surgery. He gave Rachel a cynical smile. "Well, to each his own," he said. "I put my faith in Dr. X,"

mentioning the name of the highly respected cardiac surgeon who would be heading Immy's surgical team in the morning. "I doubt he needs much help from Lourdes."

Rachel made a mental note to take the medal off Immy's gown before she went to surgery in the morning so it wouldn't get lost in the OR or the recovery room.

But an emergency interfered with those plans and Immy had already gone upstairs for surgery when Rachel got there.

The surgery lasted almost twelve hours and things had not gone well.

The bypass pump had malfunctioned for several minutes and Immy had lost a great deal of blood.

She was on a respirator, unconscious and unresponsive, in the Intensive Care Unit.

One the day after the surgery, Immy's mother told Rachel in a shaking voice that Immy's gown had been removed in the operating room and thrown into the hospital laundry.

The medal was gone.

Rachel called the surgery resident and told him what had happened.

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"Perhaps you should tell Dr. X," Rachel replied. The resident laughed.

"Don't be absurd," he said.

That night Rachel couldn't sleep.

At two in the morning, she dressed and returned to the hospital to look in on Immy.

She was no better.

Her parents had not left the ICU waiting room.

They talked for a time but Rachel had no news and could offer little comfort.

Her heart ached for them and for Immy.

Rachel remembered the lost medal.

Before she tried again to sleep, she took some paper and wrote to Dr. X telling him what had happened and how important the medal was to Immy's family.

Folding the note in half, she taped it to the closed door of the surgeon's office.

Later, she wondered if she had been foolish in thinking he would care.

The next evening, Rachel returned to learn Immy was no better.

She stopped by the ICU to examine Immy and speak to her family.

She found the little girl still unconscious

but as she leaned over to listen to her chest, she suddenly noticed a medal pinned to her hospital gown.

Turning to her parents in relief, she asked if it was another one.

"No," said Immy's mother.

Dr. X had come that afternoon and brought it to them.

Rachel expressed her gladness.
“Yes,” said Immy’s father, “we’re glad too.
She is safe now, no matter what happens.”

Later Rachel heard from the surgery resident how the medal had been found.
Dr. X had made his patient care rounds much as usual,
followed by a dozen or so of the young surgeons he was training.
But instead of ending the rounds in the ICU,
he had taken them all to the laundry department in the basement of the hospital.
There, he explained what had happened,
and then he and all his residents and fellows had gone through
the pediatric laundry from the day before
looking for Immy’s gown.
It had taken half an hour but they had found it, neatly folded,
with the medal still attached.

Rachel was astonished.
“The people who work in the laundry room must have been
very surprised to see you all there, and especially with Dr. X himself.
Did he say why he asked you to do this?”
“Oh yes,” the resident replied.
Surrounded by mountains of clean sheets and towels,
Dr. X had told the elite young surgeons he was training
that it was as important to care for people’s souls as it was
to care for their hearts.
(“Lost and Found” from Rachel Remen’s My Grandfather’s Blessings)

In the end, there is love.
More than a feeling, it is a spiritual gift,
a gift that we are always learning about and practicing.
Like the great surgeon who took time to teach love,
each of us, in this congregation, can model and teach love.
All of us are teachers and all of us are students.
When the young people from Teen Talk go to Alexander Place
to visit our seniors, they are learning the practice of love.
When members of the congregation drive people to church
or to their medical appointments or to the grocery store,
they are models of love.
When other members care for our comfort in these church buildings,
they model caring for the community.
Whether or not we are conscious of it,
our manner toward one another, our care for one another
our sharing of resources with others,
the way in which we handle differences,
all of these can model love.
And in the end, when God judges the secrets of human hearts,

when we see this life from the other side of the resurrection,
we will discover that even the things that have seemed most glorious and exalted to us
have been like child's play.

Our cares and conflicts and what we think we know
will seem of little importance.

In the end, it is only love that won't be obsolete.

In the end, there is love.

In the end, there is only love.

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