

July 23, 2017

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 13:1–13; 1 John 4:7–21

TITLE: What' s Love Got To Do With It

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1 Corinthians 13:1–13

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 do not have love, I gain nothing.

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.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly,* but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

1 John 4:7–16

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Sermon

What does it mean to say that God is Love? Not that God loves, but that God IS love.

Later today I am meeting with a young couple whose wedding I will be officiating later in August. And thinking about that reminds me of the many weddings I've done where the words from 1st Corinthians that we just heard are read. The bride and groom stand there and look dewy eyed at each other, the families and those in attendance are touched by the beauty and ceremony of the moment and pretty soon we are all caught up in this fantasy of believing that these words will define their relationship: that they will always be patient and kind; that they will never be envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; that neither one will insist on his or her own way; that neither will ever be irritable or resentful; that they will bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things.

Now, I do not want to be the cynic here; but we all know, THAT is a fantasy. It is just not possible: not because these two people are not in love with each other, but because they are human—and because those words were not written to describe the inner dynamic of a marriage. Paul uses them here to describe the goal of the Christian life. The GOAL of the Christian life.

And I want us to consider that they are not only the goal of the Christian life, but also, attributes of God. We say that God is love and so it is God, first and foremost, who is patient and kind. It is God who is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Who does not insist on God's own way (but will let us fail and bear the consequences). It is God who is not irritable or resentful; and it is God who bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things—for us. But, there is more to it than that. To say that God is love and that we are created in the image of God is to say that at our most basic level, in what spiritual writers call our True Self, we are Love.

Many of you know by now that I am drawn to the cosmological theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. A few weeks ago, I spoke of how de Chardin's understanding of creation is that creation, incarnation and redemption are one movement. God gives God's Word (with a capital "W") into nothingness as the Big Bang, and as that evolutionary process unfolds, it does so as the Body of Christ—such that all that exists, exists in Christ. We, then, are all one in Christ.

Well, Teilhard also looked at the creation and saw in the evolutionary process a pattern. That pattern goes like this: 2 or more elements (molecules, particles, animals, humans) have an attraction for each other, are drawn to each other, and form a union. Then, out of that union, Teilhard observed, greater complexity is created (A couple of hydrogen and an oxygen molecule are attracted to each other, they form a union and create the more complex thing: water. The couple in our wedding scenario feel attracted to one another and form a union, a marriage (but it could be any kind of relationship) and out of that relationship comes greater complexity. She will have to learn to deal with his socks on the floor. He will have to accommodate her always being late. And, Teilhard would say, that with the increased complexity comes, however simple, greater consciousness. They both will learn something out of the relationship. They become more aware of themselves and of the world.

So this pattern that Teilhard noticed was: attraction & union leading to greater complexity and increased consciousness. And we all practice this pattern. As the song goes: "Birds do it, bees do it, Even educated fleas do it." Teilhard would add that molecules do, particles do, even micro-organisms do it. All of evolution, he says, uses this pattern. OK? So, this attraction to another which is the basis for all evolution, Teilhard suggests is Love. It is the action of God working in evolution, working in the world. It is the action of God in drawing two things together to create greater complexity and greater consciousness—THAT IS God at work in the world. God is Love.

In fact, contemporary deChardin scholar, Ilia Delio, wants to posit that it is here, in the work of Love, that a bridge can be formed between science and religion. She suggests that the question for scientists (and I know that some of you are) is not "What are you studying?" but "What do you love?" "What are you attracted to, what do you unite yourself to, that will create something new, something more complex, something which will increase our consciousness?"

There is God.

Thomas Merton says, "To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that Love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name."

Which brings us back to the wedding and to the reality that we, frankly, are not always patient or kind or all the rest of it. We do not always demonstrate the characteristics of Love. John says "God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them." The Greek word that is translated here as "abide" can also be translated as "remain", "stay", or "wait." You see, as a part of God's creation our reality is that we are in God, as the Body of Christ. It is a passive reality. We did not choose it and we cannot really change it. But our living into that reality, our owning it, requires our consent, our action. It requires that we remain, stay, that we wait, that we abide—that we consent to our reality and participate in it.

We have this True Self; but, from the time that we were born, we learned ways to get what we needed or wanted, ways to keep ourselves safe. And those roles that we put on in the world that are the response to our fear or our anger or whatever—all of this, it gets in the way of our true identity. The nursing of our pain, or our grudges, or incessant desires for more, or our need to have things our way; or our need to be the good little girl or the brave little boy; our hiding behind being the successful one or the pious one or the bad one—all of this—form what spiritual writers call the False Self. And we all have one. But it is this False Self that keeps us from abiding in Love, from claiming our true identity, so that even the good that we do is often done out of some sense of obligation or fear or guilt or self-importance rather than as an overflowing of Love.

It is the work of examining one's life and peeling away the layers of False Self that is spiritual formation. It is about learning not TO love which requires effort, but to BE love,

to abide. So that patience and kindness is who we are. There is no longer any space to be envious or boastful or arrogant or rude or to insist on our own way. And it is as we shed the False Self and learn to abide, to live into Love that we truly can bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. As Merton says, "Love is our true destiny." And, Love never ends.