

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
Sunday, August 13, 2006

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians, chapter 13

Now, as I did warn you, if you came to the early service, you will find this will be a remarkably similar message, but expanded.

I asked this morning, and I ask again, what good is a dead king? Charlemagne was the greatest Christian ruler of the early Middle Ages, and historians record that after his death there was a huge funeral procession from the castle to the cathedral. As tradition had it, when the royal casket arrived with pomp and circumstance, it was met by the local bishop who barred the door to the cathedral, and he asked beyond the barred door, “Who comes here?” The answer from the royal page was, “Charlemagne, lord and king of the holy Roman Empire.” The bishop said, “Him, I know not. Who comes here?” The herald was a bit shaken, and he said, “Charles the Great, a good and honest man of the earth.” The bishop said, “Him, I know not. Who comes here?” The royal herald was now completely crushed, and he responded, “Charles, a lowly sinner who begs the grace of Christ.” To which the bishop responded, “Enter. Enter and receive Christ’s gift of life.”

What a reminder of who we really are! What an antidote to spiritual pride! 1 Corinthians 13 is smack in the middle of three chapters dealing with spiritual pride. I know that we usually read it at weddings, and it’s good for weddings, but it is much, much more than that, much more. If you read it carefully, it is a lot more like a smack across the mouth than it is a romantic reading of love for a wedding. It smacks us in our pride. It shuts our mouth before God. All the Apostles meant to shut the Corinthians’ mouths. Imagine pride and ego and arguing in a Christian church! Aren’t you glad that we don’t do such things?

The Gospel is God loves you. By God’s spirit within you, you are to humbly pass that love on to others. That is the Gospel completed. God loves you, and God’s spirit inhabits you, and enables you to pass that same love and hope and forgiveness on to others, but there is a perverse flip side to the Gospel.

Some people feel that God ought to love me, and that is spiritual pride. That kind of pride makes all of your gifts explode into nothing. Physical or spiritual or monetary or time or talent, they explode into nothing if your faith is based upon “God ought to love me.” You multiply a gift of God by ego, and you get a big, fat zero. You make it nothing. You make it naught. You make it empty.

This is what was going on in Corinth. Some were saying I give money, yeah, me. Or I speak in tongues, I’m special. Or I have so much faith, why, I bet I could move mountains. I bet I could. Or I’m willing to die for my faith in God. Corinth went from celebrating themselves and their cleverness, it was a city just engrossed in Greek philosophy of the time, and they converted from their engrossment and their interest in the fashion of the day, a philosophy, they kind of swapped over to Christianity as their new fashion of the day. They were almost Christian, but they didn’t quite have it. How tragic to be almost Christian! They had the words, and they had the Gospel story, but

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instead of binding together as a community under Christ, instead of embracing one another and the world around them, instead of that, they divided up and they started looking down on others according to who had which gift or which ability or which resource. Imagine!

I have studied and filled my brain with all mysteries and all knowledge, and I even have prophetic powers. Paul said, “Good! Good! But if you do not have love, you are nothing.” Another might say I give away my money and my possessions, and Paul said, “If you do not have love in your heart, your giving equals nothing.” One said, “I speak in tongues.” Paul said, “Tongues? If you have no love in your heart, your tongues are nothing more than a clanging gong or a banging cymbal. Without love, your tongues are just noise, not praise, not worship.” Another competing Corinthian Christian said, “I have so much faith, I bet I could move mountains,” and Paul said, “Even mustard seed faith will do that.”

But even moving mountains or doing great things without the love of Christ equals zero. A faith without love in its heart is as empty and as dry as a bone. There is no life in it. There is no future in it. There is no God in it. Finally, the trump card! Someone might declare, “Why, I would give up my body to be burned for my faith. Top that!” Paul answers, “Okay, give up your body to be burned, be martyred for your faith, but if there is no love in your heart, you gain nothing.” God is not impressed. Your life and your faith amount to nothing if God is not in it.

You always thought that this was a wedding text. I want you to understand that it is more, and maybe now you think, okay, it was speaking to the Corinthians, it’s an ancient text, but I want to bring it up to date.

I serve on committees. I spend hours and hours on projects. I give of my talents and my time and my money, and I have pulled strings, and I have cut red tape, and I have moved mountains for this church to make things happen, and I’ve even ruined my faith fretting over this church. Paul would ask, “Was it done because of the overflowing love of God in your heart, then good! If it was done to gain glory for yourself, then it was nothing, and God is not impressed.” A whole lot of people do a whole lot of things in the name of faith, which have nothing whatsoever to do with the love of God in Christ. Doing stuff and giving away stuff and giving time and talents and gifts and even giving your life is not enough if you don’t first give your heart to God in Christ. What I mean is very specific! God made His nature, His personality, His face, Himself known in Jesus Christ, and He offers us relationship – real and life-changing and eternal. No matter how grandly we try to show faith on our own, without first having the love of Christ in our hearts, it falls flat. It is not good. It is just one more way that we try to put ourselves above others who do less than we do. Our minds, our money, our spiritual gifts, even our bodies to be burned amount to nothing if we don’t first really and truly have the love of God in our hearts. God gives us love not because we deserve it, not because we earn it by what we do. We cannot earn God’s love. That is an absurdity. The fact that someone would even think that shows a complete misunderstanding of God’s love. Love simply

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is, and it is the mark of God’s presence, for God is love. Love is God’s nature, and love cannot be, and has never been earned.

We must first know our need and accept God’s love, and then we will be able to truly love others. With Jesus Christ inside your love, your life will look like this, not just during a wedding, not just at a marriage, but always and everywhere and even with people you don’t like. Didn’t Jesus say to love your enemies? The love of Christ in you shows outwardly as, and Paul writes these down, these positives, it shows outwardly as patience. Are you patient? The love of Christ in you shows outwardly as kindness. Are you kind? If the love of Christ is in you, then you are not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. The love of Christ in you does not insist on its own way all the time. It is not quick to anger nor resentful. The love of Christ in you does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. The love of Christ in you can bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things. The love of Christ never ends. All this stuff you can do or have done will come to an end. All that lasts is the love of God. That’s the one thing that matters. Make sure that the love of God is where you build your life and where you place your hope.

Finally, Paul speaks true but very harsh words to the Corinthians and to you and to me. Paul is saying at the end of this chapter, “Grow up. Grow up. Quit comparing, quit competing, and quit believing in your baby faith that you can impress God.” Paul puts it this way, “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought as a child, I reasoned as a child, then I became an adult, a man or a woman, I put away childish ways. I stopped thinking the way you think. For now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face.” He’s saying, okay, you might not completely understand now, but one day you will, and it’s important that you do. Now, I know only in part, but then I will know fully even as I have been fully known. One day, one day, God will judge not what we think is important, but upon seeing us face to face will judge whether we accepted His love into our hearts as our only hope and our only reason to live. Without it in our lives, our lives amount to nothing. With it, we have God’s eternal embrace.

In the Christian vocabulary, love is not a wimpy word. Wimpy, weak, ineffectual, love is not that kind of word – though our culture kind of throws it around like that. Jesus was a hand grenade jumper. He was a hero, one who could have called down the wrath of Heaven, but instead out of love said to Judas, “Do what you do quickly.” They could not scare Him. They could not shut Him up. They could not control Him so they decided to kill Him. As they nailed Him there, no whining, but praying, praying for those who nailed Him there on trumped up charges, and even as He died, they could not control Him. He blessed, and cursed not. He forgave the thief who died one cross over. He forgave those who watched not knowing, not knowing at all what they were doing. A thousand, thousand angels He could have called down, but instead He took our sins upon Him as the one perfect sacrifice so we could go home to God forgiven, face-to-face, one day. Home to God from whom we came and to whom we can return by the love of Jesus Christ.

“Nothing at All”

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We all walk around with the hand grenade pin pulled, and it's a question of only how long the fuse is of death and judgment, when it will catch up with us. Jesus has already jumped on that particular grenade for us. Now, how do we respond to God's great gift, His gift, His victory over sin and death?

I'll finish with a story. A veteran of 40 years as a Christian missionary, died, and this was found in his billfold. It was a worn out carbon copy of a little essay on love. It sort of follows the pattern of 1 Corinthians 13 in its depth. If I mastered the language ever so perfectly and speak it like a pundit, but have not the love that grips the heart, I am nothing. If I have decorations and diplomas and academic honors, but have not the touch of understanding love, I am nothing. If I have great ideals and magnificent plans and wonderful visions, but have not the love that sweats and bleeds and weeps and prays and pleads, I am nothing. If I leave home and friends and comfort and surrender my body to be consumed in the heat and the sweat and the mildew of India, but have not the love that knows only of empathy and mercy and forgiveness, I am nothing. If I can heal all manner of sickness and disease, but wound hearts and hurt feelings for want of love, I am nothing. If I write books and publish learned articles, but fail to transcribe the word of the cross in the language of love in my life, I am nothing. If by offering my gift at the altar and there remember that I have something against a brother or a sister, and do not seek to reconcile with them, I am nothing. Do not lead an empty life. Seek first the love of God in your heart, and then all that is good and Godly will follow and will grow. Amen.