

UNBOUNDED LOVE

1 Corinthians 13
Luke 4:21-30

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TEXT: 1 Corinthians 13:7 “[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

PURPOSE: To allow ourselves to participate in Jesus’ way of sharing God’s love, which recognizes no boundaries or limitations.

I’m feeling a little like a *Hallmark Hall of Fame* Movie. You know, those wonderful dramas which find their way into the TV schedule right around two weeks before holidays that call for the sending of, hopefully, Hallmark cards? We are exactly two weeks away from Valentine’s Day, and here we are, hearing what has come to be known as ‘the love chapter’ from First Corinthians. This passage is an all too familiar text, a favorite at weddings. I also find it requested for the funerals of people who loved the way the passage describes love.

Hallmark, by the way, put its program on last night, complete with tear-jerking commercials. I regret to tell you that this sermon lacks tear-jerking commercials.

Much as we love what the love chapter has to say about love, Paul wasn’t encouraging love between married people, or even within families. Paul was calling upon a church, specifically a congregation in which some people were insinuating that their spiritual gifts were more significant than others, to let love among the people of that church be the gift most shared. This is no easy undertaking for any church. Isn’t it amazing how congregations gathered around Christ’s perfect gift of love, places where people come seeking safety and acceptance and forgiveness could be, in so many instances, hotbeds of criticism and meanness and exclusivity?

This unloving behavior didn’t start with the Corinthian Christians, and it didn’t end with them. Today’s Gospel story recounts how Jesus went back to his home church, actually his home synagogue, for a decisive inaugural event in his ministry. At first he was received warmly. No wonder, if his sermon was as short as what Luke recorded in his gospel. Probably they had a nice cake celebrating his ministry. He was, after all, a hometown boy who made good. But in a remarkably short time, Luke tells us, “all in the synagogue were filled with rage.” How quickly that which passes for love but which is actually an emotion based on some sort of transaction, some version of “I’ll affirm you if you meet my expectations,” can deteriorate into contentiousness or meanness or even rage. This story in Luke is one of the most peculiar stories about Jesus in all the gospels.

Instead of Jesus thanking the people for their support and basking in their accolades, he shot some rather incendiary stuff back at them. He accused the congregation of wanting him to perform the kind of wondrous deeds that they'd heard he'd done elsewhere. I wonder why he didn't. After all, didn't those deeds reveal what God was doing through him? And then, he really pushed some buttons, some national and ethnic buttons, to be exact. There were lots of Israelite widows during the years of the famine, he reminded them, but God only sent Elijah to benefit a foreigner. And there were lots of Israelites suffering from leprosy in the days of the prophet Elisha, but God only had him cleanse a general of the Syrian army, which was, at the time, a sworn enemy of Israel.

For a reason that is not obvious from the story, Jesus appears to be throwing down the gauntlet. He is like a kid who comes home showing off a good report card but who manages, while his parents offer praise, to start a fight. The kid stomps off to his room, a loudly slammed door putting an exclamation point on the failed conversation. The parents look at each other and wonder what's become of the eager-to-please child that used to live with them. Not a Hallmark card moment. None of us have ever experienced something like this.

But Jesus' rejection at Nazareth had nothing to do with raging hormones. It's not that he has some perverse need to rock the boat. It's that he understands his mission will not be bounded by parish or nation or even religious affiliation. Jesus had just proclaimed that Isaiah's prophecy of healing for the brokenhearted, sight for the blind, and release for the captives, was being fulfilled in him, right there and then. I'm sure there were brokenhearted, and blind, and captive people in Nazareth. There are people like that everywhere. So why not let compassion begin at home? Jesus needed to make it clear right from the beginning of his ministry that he was not about to be domesticated. He was called to serve God, not some defined group of people. He recalled Elijah's care for a foreign widow, and Elisha's care for an enemy combatant, to remind God's chosen people that they do not have exclusive rights to God's love.

Of course we agree that God's love is for everyone. Nazareth or Zarepath, Concord or Harare, Portsmouth or Port-au-Prince, we wouldn't want God's love to visit one place and pass over others. But that's not how we feel when the love is delivered. The truth is that it can seem as if there isn't enough compassion to go around. And whether it's a family member not giving us enough TLC when we're

sick, or a minister not visiting us when we're lonely, or a group of people whom we believe ought to get the church's attention being ignored, it's pretty easy to go exactly the opposite direction from Paul's description of love, to become irritable and resentful, to keep a records of wrongs, and to insist on our own way.

Not only that, but when we're feeling needy, and we see people who seem undeserving or ungrateful receive attention from people we think ought to be taking care of us, setting some boundaries on love—with us, of course, inside those boundaries—seems like the right way to allocate love, be it human love or divine love. And then, whether it's a Syrian soldier with leprosy or a homeless man with hepatitis, it becomes easy to find reasons why some people should be outside the boundary.

But the fact is that God's love truly is boundless. God appointed Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations, not just to Israel. God gave Jesus a special charge to bring salvation to people whom good religious people in his day thought to be inappropriate for fellowship with God. And God called Paul to be apostle to the Gentiles—to share the transforming Gospel of Jesus with people who were thought by Jewish people to be totally and permanently excluded from the community of God's people.

The limitlessness of God's love was difficult to accept in those days. It has been difficult to accept in times since then. And it remains difficult to accept in our time. But it is exactly the love that God calls us to share. This past week, I attended the monthly meeting of the Greater Concord Interfaith Council. This is the organization which includes a wide variety of faith communities in the Concord area, and which, among other things, sponsors the upcoming Lenten Lunches and the CROP Walk to fight hunger, which raises money both for local food banks and for the global work of Church World Service. At this particular meeting, we heard a report from a group which had evaluated last fall's CROP Walk, which, unfortunately, raised less money than it has for about five years. The group had received feedback that suggested we might get more support if we severed connections with Church World Service and just raised funds for the local hunger-fighting organizations. The report's presenter indicated that the evaluation team had actually spent quite a bit of time considering this option. I am happy to tell you that one of the newer members of the Interfaith Council produced a rather loud raspberry when the presenter shared this idea. Indeed, the evaluation team

had rejected it themselves, but the very fact that it got the attention it did suggests that setting up boundaries for our expressions of love is alive and well, right here in Concord.

But no matter whether we limit our expressions of love, God's love will remain unbounded. The money we helped to raise through our CROP Walk last fall made rapid response to the Haitian earthquake possible well before aid organizations began appealing for our emergency support. Not only that, but the policies and strategies which have long been basic to the way Church World Service works are addressing needs in Haiti which demonstrate the boundlessness of Christlike love.

I've been following responses to the earthquake through our daughter Grace's web site¹ as well as through Church World Service bulletins. In one of those bulletins, I learned about Service Chretien d'Haiti (SCH), one of Church World Service's partner organizations in Haiti. This group is making a special effort to reach people with disabilities with aid they cannot get to by themselves. The Church World Service web site quoted SCH executive director Ernst Abraham: "There is much to do in Port-au-Prince to guarantee that persons with disabilities are getting their needs met. They are not able to go and stand in the large distribution or water lines to get aid from organizations that do not go to them. Our distribution is very different in that we are personally delivering the kits, food and water by our staff and trained volunteers." Some 2,500 people are being assisted in this effort—people who might otherwise be overlooked, but who deserve to receive aid no less than those who are able to go to the aid.

We may not experience the unboundedness of God's love, but God will find ways to get the love where it needs to go. It may seem to us that God's love gets rationed, with too small a portion per serving, but in fact, God's love is lavished on the world, poured out as Christ's life is poured out. We may wonder when God gets around to loving us, but the fact is that God is already loving us to life and inviting us to be part of the great work of loving the world back to its proper relationship with God. God's boundless love finds its way to every place where love needs to be, and that, indeed is every place, even in us. God loves each of us, and each human being, as if we were the only object of God's love in the whole

¹www.mutualaid disasterrelief.com

world.

Go ahead and revel in that love. Trust it. Let it shape your life. Become a Hallmark moment as you share love as extravagantly as love has been shared with you. And realize that God, as unlimited in power as God is unbounded in love, is seeing to it that saving love is finding its way to everyone, until all creation is caught up in the awesome love of our creator.