

The Greatest of These is...
Mothers' Day, The Festival of the Christian Home

I Corinthians 13; Luke 24:13-16, 28-35

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

If you know anything about the Bible at all, you probably know at least the 23rd Psalm and I Corinthians 13, and I Corinthians 13, Paul's hymn of love, would seem to be an appropriate passage on which to preach on Mothers' Day. This is Mothers' Day and in this community we honor our mothers and also on this particular Sunday focus on the family and its importance for not only our individual lives, our corporate lives, but far beyond that for, what is more fundamental than the family, that basic social unit where we experience our formation, where we are shaped for good or for ill for the rest of our days? So, on this Mothers' Day once again, I invite you to think with me about the family and the interpersonal relationships and those bonds of love and grace that bind us together in the family.

I entitled the sermon "The Greatest of These Is..." You probably thought I just got tired of writing. And you finished the title, I am sure. Obviously, the title is "The Greatest of These Is Love." But, not really, because I wanted to shake you out of your assumptions and your presumptions, to grab you by the nape of the neck, wake you out of your lethargy and suggest to you that St. Paul might not have been right. Maybe the greatest of these is something other than love. I have an idea, but I'll make you wait for it. It is not that I really want to argue with Paul because who can argue with love? I admit I am going to use Paul this morning not exactly as Paul was meaning to communicate in this writing, and yet I don't think I am going to use what he had to say.

To be honest with Paul, he was dealing with a concrete congregation and a concrete problem that was going on at that time. This letter to the church at Corinth dealt with some things that were happening and this hymn of love is Paul's beautiful suggestion and model that is held up to a congregation that had a lot of spiritual gifts and a lot of things going on, but was filled with tension and strife because all of those spiritual gifts were being exercised with self-aggrandizement and with pride, and Paul had to say to the Corinthian congregation, "Look, the church is like the body of Christ and the body has a lot of different parts, a lot of different members, and all parts are necessary for the

right functioning of the whole, so an eye cannot look down on a thumb or the ear on the big toe. We need every part in order that the whole may be furnished, and there is no place for superiority, there is no place for the denigration of someone else in the body of Christ."

If you go to the last verse in the 12th chapter, he says, "But, let me show you a better way." And then if you go to the first verse of the 14th chapter, he says, "Pursue love." Then he goes on and talks again about the gifts. So, chapter 13 is really in the midst of that discussion sandwiched between his appeal to the congregation to exercise their respective gifts with humility and grace and his conclusion at the end of that discussion that all things might be done decently and in order in the body of Christ. In the meantime, in the midst of it, we have this beautiful hymn of love, and even reading it this morning once again, really to read it is enough. Just to read it and to hear it, one would hardly need a sermon, but, of course, you will get one anyway.

I Corinthians 13, the hymn of love which concludes with Paul's claim, "The greatest of these is love. My sermon, "The Greatest of These Is ..." Is there anything that might be put in place of love in that title on this Mothers' Day as we think about families in the context of our present world? Is there any other virtue that we might substitute for love? Well, I would say only if we are English-speaking people who have to use love for the word that Paul used. Now, again if you have hung around preachers very long or gone to church very often, you know that at some point or other, every six or eight weeks, a preacher has to remind you that he or she has studied the original language and give you a little Greek lesson.

But, this Greek lesson is really important this morning because the English word *love* is translated by three different words in the New Testament and actually the Greek language has four words for love, the act of making love or sexual love is *epithemia*, but that is not one I want to deal with. More commonly you know of the word *filia*, which is the love of friendship, a love that has mutuality about it. The city of Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love, literally from the Greek language. And then there is the Greek word *eros* and the Greek word *eros* may remind you in English of erotic, but that is too bad. *Eros* in the Greek meaning has gotten a bad rap because we so quickly identify it with the word erotic and really the erotic dimension is a declension of *eros* in its original meaning. *Eros* in the Greek language meant that being drawn, that attraction to that which is attractive, that love of that which is lovely, that which draws me, that which lures me on, and it is a wonderful thing. It is that which marks our humanity. We are drawn to that which is true and which is good and which is beautiful, and that is all very positive. *Eros* in the Greek sense is that quest for fulfillment, that quest for completion. It is that quest for union and communion. So, it has a very positive meaning in the Greek language. We translate it love, but we really could better translate it that desire for union and fulfillment, the yearning for God is an erotic quest, understood correctly in the Greek language. The desire for oneness

with all of reality has at its base that word *eros* in the Greek language, so it is a very positive conception. The word sex in the Latin is *secare*, and that means to cut or to divide, and in ancient wisdom, those who thought deeply about these things said the human being is cut and is divided and there is within, intrinsic, endemic, indeed human, that longing for reunion, for communion, and so that is in the Greek language the idea of *eros*.

But, the word that Paul uses in I Corinthians 13 is *agape*, and *agape* is love that accords love and value to the other. It is the recognition of the dignity and value of the other.

When I was learning my Greek and studying theology, I had a misconception of *agape*. Now, it is probably the most common of the Greek words. To get that one wrong was to be wrong right at the center of things, and of course, I was. I understood *agape* initially as the love of a lover for that which is unlovely. It is a love that flows out of the lover unmotivated, unelicited, and of course, that is the love of God. It is the love of God for dirty rotters like us. While we were yet sinners, God loved us. We have that written so deeply within us, that the love of God for us is so amazing because we are nothing.

I was saying to Bob that, for some reason in the shower this morning, I was singing "Jesus Loves Me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." And then I went on to that verse, "Jesus loves me, Heaven's gates will open wide, he will wipe away my sin and let his little child go in." And I thought, "Dear God, from a child I'm warped." A child, a little sinner that has to sing about Jesus opening the gates wide for this little child who is a sinner. What an awful thing we have done to children. I am surprised I've made it this long. My conception of *agape* was the love of God for that which is totally unlovely, worthless. That is the amazing grace of God and I realize what I was doing, and I only reflected what the church has done forever and that is to exalt the love of God at the expense of God's creature.

We were at the Jewish Temple one Friday night for a Sabbath service, and Krister Stendahl, that great New Testament scholar who preached here that same weekend, was talking about *agape* in a sense in which I had never understood *agape*. It was *agape* which sees, recognizes and acknowledges value in another, and I raised my hand in the discussion and said, "Krister, that's not how I understand *agape*. *Agape* loves what is worthless. That's the way I have been taught."

He said, "You have been taught wrong." Well, who was I to argue with Krister Stendahl? To be sure, I was taught wrong. The love of God that flows out of God is not a love that embraces that which is unlovely, worthless. The love of God dignifies us, recognizes the value, calls us to be all that we can be so that *agape* is a love, to be sure, different than *eros*. I see you, I am so attracted to you, there is something lovely and beautiful about you, or maybe it is a sunset or a starry sky, or maybe it's a pizza or a martini, but that which is really wonderful I am drawn to. That is *eros*.

But, *agape* is serious; that is the love that recognizes value and values by the expression of love. *Eros* has a kind of mutuality about it, a mutual attractiveness. With *agape*, the lover dignifies the other because the lover sees in the other that which is of worth and of value. And so, the greatest of these is...

If you go with the Greek, I'll grant you the greatest of these is *agape*. But, the English language being so unable to convey that, how about if we said the greatest of these is respect? What if perhaps our highest calling in our interpersonal relationships and our human family relationships and in our global relationships, what if the highest value or virtue were respect in the sense of that loving, positive regard for the other that sees in the other that which is of worth and value? For, what is the human but the embodiment of the divine? What is incarnation? What do we say at Christmas - the word became flesh, the word became human, the divine intention was realized in the human. And, of course, as I have said over and over again, we isolate that and say it was a Jesus period, put Jesus over there and all the rest of us over here, but as a matter of fact, Jesus was the paradigm, was the model.

What was recognized in Jesus is what is true and that is that the human is the embodiment of that mystery of being, that infinite who comes to expression, that becomes concretized in the cosmic drama and consciously in the human being, and therefore, when I look at you, I should see in you the sacred and the divine, and it will totally determine the manner in which I relate to you. The greatest of these is *agape*. The greatest of these is respect. The greatest of these is to be able to see in the other the image of God, and I wonder if that is not what is most important in our families and in our world - to be able to recognize the sacred in the other?

When Charles Kimball was here a couple of weeks ago, on Saturday morning in his lecture, he was relating an incident that had happened to him shortly before. On the day when the bombs began to fall in Baghdad, he took his car for servicing at a dealership and he was sitting there waiting and some of the employees came into the showroom and they were sort of bumping each other and congratulating each other and saying, "I guess old Saddam knows who was boss now," and so forth, in a kind of male, macho way, and Charles began to speak and then he was quiet and waited for a few minutes. And then he said to them, "Would you feel that way if you were a parent crouching in an apartment huddled with your children, worrying about whether or not a bomb might fall?" And when he told us that, and this is why I am telling you now, he choked up and when a speaker chokes up, ten seconds is like an eternity. He felt it so deeply, and I think in a moment we all did when we recognized that *agape*, that kind of love disallows the demonizing of the enemy, the dehumanizing of the other.

As I was studying for this day, I looked at what Jesus said in Matthew 5:44 - Love your enemies. *Agape* your enemies. I thought to myself, "Love your enemies! That's ridiculous. If love is like we have love in English where love covers

everything like loving pizza and loving my friends and loving my family and loving God, if that is what loving my enemies is, forget it! I don't love my enemy that way. I don't feel any kind of emotional attachment, any kind of affection. What do you mean, Jesus? What kind of an impossible ethic is that? I might as well just scrap it."

But, Jesus said, *Agape*, love your enemies. Could we understand it better if we had a better English word, if we could say have respect for your enemies? Recognize the sacred and the divine in your enemy? That little paragraph in the Sermon on the Mount ends with Jesus saying, "Be ye therefore perfect as your father in heaven is perfect." (King James Version) But, what is perfect in Greek? It is *telios*. What is *telios*?

Telios is mature or complete. Be a mature human being. Respect your enemy. We are told that when Gandhi was assassinated, he bowed to his assassin acknowledging the divinity in his enemy. Of course, Gandhi had his rich Hindu tradition, but he hung around a bit with Jesus, as well, who on the cross said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing. But they are still human. They still bear your image. They still call forth from me respect. I'm not ready to hang out with them, hug them, but to respect them."

It seems to me that this is maybe the greatest of these. I'll go with love if it is *agape*, but I don't think you're going to go around the rest of your life remembering the Greek word. So, how about if we just say the greatest of these is respect? How far would respect *go*? Wouldn't it go a long way? And in our world today which is a global society, that's not just pulpit talk. You want to talk about SARS? You want to talk about the interconnection of world economy?

We are bound up in the bundle of life. It is a global society. We have moved out of the swamps and out of the mud; we have moved through all those stages of development; we have moved finally to human consciousness, human awareness. We have moved into clans and tribes, and tribalism could have been brutal and fierce, but it wasn't too bad because it was so localized and who could do anything anyway? And then, of course, the tribes became nations and nationalism became the great sin. Nations could get more serious. They could create a lot of havoc, a lot of devastation, a lot of death.

But, today it is a global society and we are one, whether we like it or not. Therefore, it would seem high time that we become mature as God is mature, and that we acknowledge that being still so held back by our survival instincts and jungle instincts, yet in this old world of ours today there will be those moments when that which is evil and wrong is so obvious that it needs to be struck down. What we need to see even more fundamentally is that war is a primitive solution and with the technology we have today, the potential we have today, we can end the whole story, unless we become mature as God is mature, and learn to love our enemy, not like him or her, not feel any affection, no emotional attachment, disgust, recognizing, calling a spade a spade, but knowing that this whole human

story is too precious to let us go off with our swaggering macho ways, with our triumphalism, with our nationalisms. Maybe into the future at some point we will mature enough and we will find the solution which would probably be to elect a Mother President.