



“Love Gives”

Scripture – 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson and three members:

Richard Diver, Patti Ridout, and Rick Suarez

Sunday, October 23, 2016

How many of you have heard this passage read at a wedding? (That’s what I thought.) In fact, I would hazard a guess that many of us have heard this text far more frequently at weddings than in any other service of worship. It has become one of the go-to passages for such celebrations. And for good reason...it is a beautiful testimony to the gift of love.

Because we so often hear this passage from First Corinthians read against the backdrop of Pachelbel’s Canon, exquisite floral arrangements, and a couple gazing lovingly into each other’s eyes, *this* is the kind of love we imagine when we hear Paul’s familiar words: “...and the greatest of these is love.” We picture *romantic* love – the kind of love that makes us weak in the knees and causes dormant butterflies to stir in our stomachs. Don’t get me wrong – this is love that is worth celebrating, and affirming, and supporting. But it’s not the kind of love Paul is talking about.

Paul is writing this letter to a community that is deeply divided. The church in Corinth, as we learn a mere ten verses into the letter, is plagued by conflict. Factions have emerged as members pledge allegiance to different teachers rather than affirming their unity in Christ. The wealthy disregard the poor, eating extravagant meals while others go hungry. Quarreling and in-fighting have become the norm.

So Paul writes of love because this is the only thing that will bind together this fractured community. He pauses after his treatise on spiritual gifts and how they work together for the health of the body, to wax poetic on love. For he knows that – without this virtue – the work of this community will prove futile. Paul writes this ode to love...not because the Corinthian church excels in this department, but as a call to action.¹

“Love is patient; love is kind ...” Paul describes an active love, a radical love, the kind of love that enables people of faith to commit to the messy and difficult work of being the church in a fractious world. As one scholar puts it, “This kind of love is an up at dawn, feet on the ground, tools in hand, working kind of love.”² It’s the kind of love that rejoices in diversity and heals divisions, that compels us to pursue justice and to serve one another, that gives generously and forgives freely, that binds us together in Christian unity and anchors us in the well-being of others. I dare say it’s the kind of love that prompts many of us to commit our time, our talent, and our treasure to this church and to the work of Jesus Christ through this congregation.

¹ See Shively Smith, Commentary on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, www.workingpreacher.org

² Ibid.

~ Rich Diver Testimony ~

My name is Rich Diver and I am a Balcony Person. Actually I'm a Westminster Lifer; baptized, confirmed, married and I eulogized my Father earlier this year here even though none of those events occurred in the loft that I consider to be one of my happiest of places.

As I look up from the pulpit this morning, I can still envision my Grandfather Richard Lowe sitting in the back row smiling and nodding as Jim Bennett was concluding a sermon. "Why do we always sit in the balcony Grandad?" I remember asking him. "Richie, my boy, we sit up here because some of us need to be closer to God both literally and figuratively." Those are words that I've used myself on many occasions when asked why I too find my way up the stairs every Sunday that I am able to worship here.

Westminster is my spiritual home and this congregation my family. Like many of my peers who grew up in Wilmington and this church, my sports activities then boarding school and college took me away from regular attendance and worship. Then with my own children and their interests, secular Sunday mornings kept us physically away from where we needed to be.

For the most part, now I am an empty nester, and have been able renew my commitment to the WPC community. There are many people that have provided me with so much personal support over my 56 years. Among them: my favorite Sunday school teachers Bob Currin, Jean May and Jane Kline. Interim Pastor Jim Glass, a man whom I had never met, visiting me in the hospital providing kind words and prayers as I recovered from pneumonia.

And, Anne Ledbetter listening compassionately, calming my anxiety over the phone (Hands Free of course) as I drove home from visiting my eldest son in Massachusetts, distraught over the impending break-up of my marriage. In times of personal triumphs and sufferings, my church has been there for me.

There are two services while I was sitting in the balcony that I and all of our church family present those days cannot forget. First, Jon Walton's incredible resolve to heal a wounded congregation over the deaths of Fred and Cleeta Mathias at the height of the Advent season even as he obviously struggled to understand how such a heinous act could befall such wonderful, giving people. Second, Greg Jones' leadership in the aftermath of the tragic kayaking accident that took the life of Chad Miller and his brother and left us once again asking ourselves why. In both cases, we're reminded that God comforts us in our sorrow and gives us the strength to survive our most difficult circumstances.

The tears that we shed, the hugs that we share, the smiles with which we greet each other, the hope that is renewed when we are here worshiping together. Those are just some of the things that make Westminster home to me. I'm proud to be a church Elder and to serve as Chair of the Stewardship campaign this year. As Dr. Jones correctly reminded me when I expressed the concern that I was too busy to serve in such an important role, "Rich, there is never a good time." Giving back my time, the humble talents that I possess and most importantly the gifts that God has bestowed upon me are blessings I appreciate more with every passing day.

~ Patti Ridout Testimony ~

My husband Bob has a friend who refers to people who attend worship as "Church People." You know the ones who smile at a fellow member who cuts them off in the parking lot and later in the day has a fit of rage with a stranger who does the same. "Church People." They have it all figured, but they can't mend their own families. Church People! The ones who support the church financially with what they want to give rather than what they can give.

I confess that I fall into a few of those slots and, as such, do not see myself as a good Christian. I know HOW to be a good Christian, I pray that I COULD be a good Christian, but each week I fall short. Then Sunday comes around, I enter this building and I experience the grace of God everywhere I turn.

I am welcomed by fellow members who extend a kind hand and greeting to me even though they may have had the same week I did. I see the smiling face of Susan Moseley who has honored me with the privilege of teaching our children. Then there is the opening of the service with Greg and his warm, often humorous and always sincere monologue conveying the humble message that although he has experienced a higher calling, he is still one of us. Then there is Paul, an extraordinary musician who masterfully leads our dedicated and highly talented choir. All of this comforts me as I sit in the pew. I am home and experiencing the calm that accompanies my weekly reboot.

Then our pastors take scripture passages that are thousands of years old and apply them to my life on that very day. This causes me to reflect on the ways in which I am not following Jesus. Often Greg's sermons so closely entwine the Bible verses to my current life that I find myself thinking, "Is he talking to me?"

At Westminster, learning about myself and the world and being inspired by others is not been limited to one hour in the sanctuary. I participate in educational opportunities at 10:10 hour that I find both enlightening and thought provoking. There are limitless opportunities for volunteerism where I always receive more than I give. Having served on many committees during my time as a Deacon and an Elder, I was, and continue to be, inspired by the ever present sincerity and grace of both the clergy and the administrative staff. And I am equally inspired by the countless volunteers who contribute to the operations and outreach missions of this church, most of whom are sitting here this morning.

The sum total of my relationships and experiences at Westminster provide me with the tools I need to develop a meaningful relationship with God...one in which I accept and reflect His grace.

I am proud to say that I am a member of Westminster Presbyterian Church, a community of faith that welcomes all people...even "Church People" like me.

~ Rick Suarez Testimony ~

The first message I want to share with you this morning is "Thank you." The honor that Josh, Alejandro, and I have in worshiping here is extraordinary. You have all been, in my opinion, beacons of what God would want us to be. Through your actions, the kindness in your eyes, the gifts, be it for Alejandro or the gift of a warm hug, I have seen God, in so many of you. For that, we should be very proud, as a church.

We all come to the church on our own spiritual journey. Mine was a path plagued with me asking a lot of questions. I consider myself inquisitive; my husband considers me exhausting. My spiritual journey began in the Catholic Church. I grew up there and, later, I taught Catechism for the church. I asked a lot of questions, along the way, only to find that it was not always appreciated. At one point, when I was 15, I asked to meet with our priest. Unfortunately, he would not address the questions I posed in a way that made sense. Therefore, I decided to leave the church and seek answers somewhere else.

Next on my journey, I moved to a more extreme church -- I moved to the Church of Christ. I thought that a church that believes that the bible is the literal word of God could teach me a lot. Rightfully, it did. This move allowed me yet another view as to how man interprets the scriptures. Yet, the greatest revelation I had, had little to do with the Church of Christ. Instead, my studies started to reveal that man was putting a lot of asterisks in religion -- meaning EXCLUSIONS -- as to who is in and who is out. It became clear to me that so many, like women for

example, were limited as to their role in the church. I was witnessing teaching from the pulpit about groups that are “allowed” in God's family and others who are not.

Then, my journey took another interesting twist, I went off to college, where I decided to move in with six guys who were becoming Church of Christ preachers; that alone is a great story to share, one day, over drinks. What is most interesting about that, is that my roommates would engage me in debates, constantly challenging my beliefs. In return, I would do the same. Arguably, it became one of the most amazing moments, in my spiritual journey. This is because it forced me to become closer to the bible -- and most critically -- closer to God. In one of debates, my challenge to the group was the fact that they preach/talk about God’s love...but, they also preach EXCLUSION...so I asked...is that really your version of God?

What is so beautiful about this church, is that I don’t see EXCLUSION -- Women are not limited or excluded; Muslims are not excluded; Gays /Lesbians/Transgender individuals are not excluded. Wherever you are or came from, in your journey, YOU are not excluded.

Is that not something to be extraordinarily proud of? Is that not something to tell everyone -- exclaiming that you have found a place where God is His fullest, or Her fullest, or THE fullest; or however else you express who God is.

It is a privilege to stand here and speak to you, and more so, it is privilege to worship God, with you. Like many of you, I have a list of members who have made an impact on our lives -- in such a small period of time -- whom I would love to mention. But, in the spirit of the message, I don’t want to *exclude* any of those that we just haven’t gotten to know.

In closing, my call to action to you is a simple one -- keep doing what you are doing. When you reach out your hand, or give someone a smile in the morning, with a twinkle in your eye...don’t forget... That is God....That is God! Thank you.

~ Concluding Remarks by Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson ~

It is clear that Westminster holds a special place in our hearts; it is our love for Christ and this church that draws us in on a Sunday morning, when we could be hitting the golf course or going out for brunch, or catching up on much needed sleep. It is our love for Christ and this community that inspires us to commit our time, our talent, and our treasure to Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Like Rich and Patti and Rick, you each have stories to tell about what Westminster means to you. I imagine you have stories about the comfort you have received in times of distress, about worship that has inspired you, about encounters that have drawn you into the radical love of Jesus Christ. So many of us have experienced this radical love here, and know this to be a community of faith that models the active love of which Paul speaks.

Do we do this perfectly? No. Do we fall short of the ideal Paul applauds in his letter to the Corinthians? Yes.

But, out of love, we commit to the messy and difficult work of being the church in a fractured world. Out of love, we commit to living out our faith through service within and beyond these walls. And, through the grace of Jesus Christ, we do nudge this world ever closer to the kingdom of God. Friends, this kingdom can only be built with love, the kind of love that gives generously and selflessly. So I ask you, how will *you* bear this love to the world?