

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"The Look of Love"  
Dr. J. Dent

January 31, 2010  
Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

There's something very difficult about speaking on the topic of love. It may presume the speaker has achieved something of note in this area. It also reminds me of attempts to talk on the subject of humility. Speaking about humility seems to disqualify a person from it. But let me make myself very clear. I am no expert on love. All I can do is to seek to once again lead you to the One who is an expert in this area, the God we know, Jesus Christ who gave himself for us.

Why is it so hard to love? Why is it hard to seek another's best before our own? I believe many of us believe we control our relationships and ourselves better than we do or even can. I believe many of us take responsibility for that which we do not have responsibility, while often not taking responsibility for what we ought to take responsibility. Control issues and boundaries are a big part of why we fail to love as we ought.

Another issue is selfishness. The Bible calls it "sin." Ironically, selfishness can be defined as believing we can control other people's lives while we fail to control our own. As we fail to take responsibility for our own actions and attitudes, we often become critical of other's actions and attitudes. Thus we exhibit irrationality and irritability in trying to love others, rather than truly care for them. If you're not sure you are like this, then please ask your spouse, family member, close friend or significant other if this is true about you or not.

As the book of James says, we often look in the mirror but apparently are unable to do anything about it. Paul simply says in 1 Cor. 12 and 13 that it is great to have all these spiritual gifts, including performing miracles and healing, but if we cannot identify what it means to love each other, then we've missed the boat. If I do not talk to you out of an attitude of love, then I might as well be "la-la-la-ing" or blah-blah-blah-ing.

I dare say there is a lot of la-la-ing and blah-blah-ing going on today in the world, in Canada, in this province, in St. John's, from me. But here are the critical questions: (1) Do you know this about yourself? (2) Do you want to change?

So much seems to come back to the First Step in the 12 step programs. "I have come to admit that my life has become unmanageable, that I cannot love another human being the way I am called to love that person." In AA, it's about not controlling the use of alcohol in myself or others. In NA, it's about not controlling the use of illicit drugs and narcotics in myself or others. In SA, it's about not controlling my sexual habits, or others', and so on through the 12 step groups.

In 1 Corinthians 13, it's about not loving others the way God loves us. And so Paul says even if you do solve all the world's justice issues, and if you raise enough money to feed all the poor, educate everyone on the planet, rebuild and sacrifice yourself to death, it means nothing if it is not done in love.

And here's the crunch: (1 Corinthians 13:4) I am impatient. I am unkind. I am envious and boastful. It's not that I want to be these things. I just acknowledge it to be an accurate description of my heart, attitudes and actions. Not all the time, but that does not excuse those many instances where this describes me. Why? It could be because I am more concerned for my rights than my responsibilities. It could be that I am more self-centered than I like to believe about me. How about you?

And the list goes on: (1 Corinthians 13:5) I do dishonour others. I am self-seeking. I am easily angered. I do keep a record of wrongs, although with age I find it harder to remember and therefore don't keep a record of wrongs as well as I used to. Dishonoring others is just a way to prop myself up because I know I make sense but others, well that's a whole other situation. I want to do what I want to do, and look out for anger or sarcasm or hurtful comments if you cross me. I do become easily angered, particularly these days when seeing the faults of other drivers. Is it just me?

Paul doesn't stop here: (1 Corinthians 13:6) I'd like to think that I rarely delight in evil. But then I realize that there several things in life that God calls evil that I struggle to call evil. And the opposite is true: there are several things that God calls good and true that I struggle to call good and true. Particularly when I read the Scripture about thankfulness, praying, and agreeing with God, I see my rebellion. How about you?

Let's keep going, there's more to confess: (1 Corinthians 13:7) I don't always protect (but almost always self-protect). I don't always trust,

although I consider myself a trusting person. I don't always hope even though the opposite of hope is very dark place. And I often give up rather than persevere in love. What are you like?

The Bible says that "love never fails" in verse 8. But I have experienced all kinds of failures of love. I have failed to love others, failing in attempts at showing love. I have experienced failed attempts to love me and a simple failure to even try and love me, particularly when I least deserve it. So what can that mean: "Love never fails?"

The love that never fails is the love that serves, that looks out for others, that balances self, others and community. This love does not fail. Don't get me wrong. Some people think love is a passive thing, like being a doormat to everyone you meet. Nothing could be more wrong. Others believe that love is something only in the mind or the emotions, like the perfect romance. But this love often fails.

Love confronts others. It speaks the truth, not to destroy or to harm, but bring light and life. Love may have to be creative in coming up with consequences. Love sometimes requires us to call the police when laws are broken and persons are harmed, including ourselves. Love sometimes calls us to make public statements that are unpopular and against the spirit of the age. Love is courageous. Love is bold.

But when you know how far short you fall of these ideals, what do you do? Do you despair? I hope not, because there is good news amongst the confession of my faults and sins, for all of us who don't love very well, but would like to love better.

First, I declare my inability to love as I ought. I also declare that I cannot change myself.

Second, I believe God can change me. I need to give myself completely and unreservedly to God so that God might change me. I also believe others can help change me, as I am honest with them, pray with them, and confess my sins that I might be healed.

Third, I declare the necessity to stay honest, even when I know I tend to either deny the truth about myself or simply distort reality as my natural inclination.

Telling the truth was one of Jeremiah's strengths. Jeremiah admits in chapter 1 he's just a kid, unable to publically speak well, let alone be a prophet of the Most High. It reminds us of Moses. Here we find Step 1 for become a spokesperson for God. Tell the truth.

Paul finishes off 1 Corinthians with some metaphors about childhood and mirrors that don't work too well. The childhood metaphor is really about the fact that in this life we only seem to be able to love at a childish level. Perhaps there are some exceptions to this rule, but not many in the history of humanity. Right now we don't love each other very well. In heaven, however, we will love each other as adults, even as we experience first hand the love of the Lord.

The mirror metaphor is also about how well we give and receive love. So often our experience of love, whether it be trying to give love or to receive love is like trying to look in the mirror after a shower. Usually the steam from the hot shower clouds the mirror to the point that we don't see hardly anything, if anything at all. We can rub with our hands or with a towel, but even then we usually don't get the whole picture. Thus it is in this life in experiencing love. It's more than a bit cloudy.

Faith, or trust in God; and hope for something much better are both wonderful experiences to relive every day. But if we truly want to reflect the One we say we follow, then we must grow in love. How? Follow the three steps above and I trust God will show you more than I have told you today.

Let us pray.