

Why We Give

by Julie Lombard 03/02/2014

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not envious, boastful or proud. Love is not dishonoring, love is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered and it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not rejoice in injustice and iniquity, it rejoices in the truth. Love never gives up on people. It's always trusting, hoping, and enduring without fail.

This is not the first time you've heard my interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7. I had to create my own interpretation of this biblical text for a New Testament class. This sort of exercise gets at the deeper understanding of the text and I chose this biblical text because I thought it was one that spoke to the deeper understanding of why we come together as a community and why we give. Ok, it's also one of my favorite passages of the Bible but that's because I believe we come together out of a need to love and be loved. I couldn't think of a better way to ask why we come together as we enter our season of stewardship.

The kind of love that Paul was writing about in this epistle to the saints of Corinth was the perfection of love. This biblical text comes from within Paul's "love hymn" which is found in its entirety in chapter 13. The part I interpreted is the core or the midsection from Paul's famous hymn where he explored the concepts of the primacy, perfection and permanence of love.

I've told you about the irony of this love letter and how it was sent to a less-desirable community that could be considered the Sin City of its day. Corinth was like the fun loving Los Vegas, where anything goes. And like Australia, it was a place where the most unwanted dregs were sent to live and work, sort of like the island of the misfit toys. But not all of the Corinthians were undesirables, Paul had founded a fledgling community of Christian followers that struggled to worship in their Hellenistic time.

In Corinth, Paul discovered that these outcasts were willing to try the radical ideas of love that he believed Christianity offered. Paul reframed the concept of crucified Christ and made it into a salvation event. Even though they were open to these new ideas, that didn't mean they always succeeded. Paul spent a lot of time with these people both in person and by writing to them when he couldn't be with them. He must have thought they were worth the extra effort. Maybe we all love the underdog a little more.

So why do we come together to be in our religious community? Why here, why now in this welcoming, caring faith community? Did love bring us here today? Do we keep coming back because we come to love and be loved?

It's only part of why we give and why we gain. We come to be a part of something larger than ourselves, something that gives more than we alone can offer. We know that we become magically powerful when we unite to give.

Every year we gather here together at just about this time to talk about your pledge and how we will keep this community working towards its greater mission and vision. We've heard the trinity message about pledging; as sharing our time, talent, and treasure. The leadership of this community has thought up all sorts of creative ways to inspire people to give.

So, what is it that you give to this community and why? Is it your time? Is it your talent? Is it your treasure or is it all of the above? I am asking you about these ideas because under all this fertile ground is where the seed of love grows.

Let's get back to Paul's epistle and back to Corinth again. Paul's love hymn was not a stewardship campaign message, but it was exploring what is at the heart of why we feel committed to this community and I think that matters to us. In Roman times there were many words for love. Paul was writing of Agape love. Agape is the Greek word for the kind of love that expresses an unselfish, self-giving, willful devotion and concern for the welfare of others. This is a love that goes beyond oneself. This is the kind of love we sang about earlier in the service when we sang the hymn "*Love Will Guide Us.*" Agape love will guide us.

In Paul's short passage he was telling the people of Corinth and us today about what love isn't more than what it is. Here's the list of things Paul felt we ought not to do; we shouldn't be envious, boastful or proud. We shouldn't be dishonoring or self-seeking. We should not be easily angered or keep records of the wrongs that others do to us. We should not stand for injustice and inequity for any human being because this sort of love celebrates the truth. This sort of love never gives up on people.

This kind of love is always trusting, hoping and enduring, without fail. Is this the love we have for this community, this welcoming, caring faith community? Is this why we come to share our time, talents, and treasure? This is a place where truth and hope endure and we are called to share this love amongst ourselves and with our neighbors. Loving our neighbors is one of the best examples of this kind of love. Loving our neighbors shows our self-giving concern for the welfare of others.

When we give of ourselves, how do we give? Do we look into our wallet and see what is left or do we offer the largest bill we find? Do we look at our schedules and say, "Well, I can't come to that committee then, I have another appointment?" Or do we prioritize our time so that we offer this community our best? Do we put this holy place ahead of our self-serving needs?

And what about our talents, do we give the best of what we have to offer or do we shy away from all we have to share because there are others with more talent than we have? None of us is the best at what we do, but I know we are a great collection of people who try darn hard at whatever we choose to do. Maybe we are the underdogs.

You never know what will grow from the gifts that you share. This is what happened to a poor young man from Detroit. You could say this man was an outcast, an underdog. The man went by the name Rodriguez. He loved to sing and play guitar. One day he was noticed for his talent while singing in a bar called the Sewer.

Some people wanted him to make a record, so this young man cut two records. And although the record company people thought Rodriguez was a musical genius, the records never sold well in America. In need of money, he returned to the construction work he had always known, it was dirty work, but he had a family to raise and he did what he needed for his three daughters. Little did he know that somehow his record would end up in South Africa. Rumor has it, and let me tell you, there were many rumors out there about Rodriguez; one claimed that he committed suicide while on stage while another claimed that a girlfriend visiting her boyfriend in South Africa brought the record and after many bootleg copies, the record just went viral. We may never know the full truth behind this true story, I do know he didn't commit suicide, but I can't tell you how his records got there or how they became so popular. What I know is while Rodriguez labored back in Detroit, he could never have imagined that his records would become popular. He never dreamed that his music would become the soundtrack to the anti-apartheid movement there, but it did.

It took that man nearly forty years to find out what his music meant to the people of South Africa and how it gave them the courage to fight their disestablishment blues. And the South Africans, they couldn't imagine why Americans didn't honor and revere Rodriguez the way they did. They were shocked when they learned that Americans hadn't heard of him because in South Africa, Rodriguez was bigger than Elvis or the Rolling Stones; Rodriguez was their Bob Dylan. He might have been our poor overlooked underdog, but he was their voice of freedom. I would like us all to think, like Rodriguez, that someday we may end somebody else's oppression and at the ripe age of seventy, we could sell out six auditoriums during a tour in a land we changed with a message from our hearts. It's too soon to tell, but together we make magical things happen here. Together we love and are loved.

Beloved siblings, we come here to remember that love is patient, love is kind. Love honors the other person, love is our selfless giving. Love seeks justice and equity for all human kind. Love rejoices in the truth and wants every voice to be heard. Love never gives up on our neighbors. Love is the growth of our faith, love brings us and others hope, and this love lives a never ending life, it eternal. This is why we come together, to be a part of this eternal life and this love that we find here in this welcoming, caring faith community. We come because we love the underdog a little bit more. We want to be a part of the magic that brings hope to the underdogs of the world.

Blessed be and Amen.