

"Getting Love Right"

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Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Mark 12:28-31; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

When I die, I hope to go to Case Medical School.

Other folks want to go to heaven, but I have more modest plans, at least in the short term. I want the students who are learning to help others through medicine to have the opportunity to take apart another human body to see how fearfully and wonderfully made we all are. By dissecting what's left of me in this world, bit by bit, layer by layer, organ by organ, those students, I hope, will be better equipped to restore a bit of life to someone in the E.R. or O.R. or in a rehab facility years from now. I hope to be able to help God and those young medical professionals bring life out of death someday. And in order for that to happen, those young people literally need to dig into the guts of the thing to see how it operates in detail.

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13 are digging into the guts of the thing to give some actual meaning to it. The thing, of course, is love, and Paul devotes a portion of his letter to the baby church at Corinth to answering their questions to him, now lost to us, "Well, what, exactly, IS love, Paul? We're ready, we think, to love God above all else and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, as Jesus told us to do, but what does love on the ground actually look like? Can you help us out here, Paul?"

And, Paul, bless his heart, helped them out, and helped all of us out, as well, by dissecting love, by telling us what love in action, as opposed to love in words, actually looks like. Love is patient, love is kind, it is not envious or boastful, arrogant or rude. Love is not self-seeking, easily angered, or diligent about keeping track of wrongs. Love doesn't take pleasure in evil but always delights in the truth. Love always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres. Love never fails. That's what love looks like when it's God's full, complete love, and not one of our many partial, imperfect loves, tainted, as most things are in this world, with self-interest.

This past Thursday found me uncharacteristically quiet in Bible Study as I listened to Pat read Paul's words about love, and I mentally held up this passage of Scripture to my own life and loves, and I found myself badly wanting. Paul says near the end of this passage that we now see in a mirror dimly or distortedly; the Greek says, literally, "enigmatically," and I know that I am not alone in sometimes experiencing love as an enigma: why I love this one and not that one, why I love this way and not that way, why my love can turn so quickly into something very unloving, and why my love is not returned as I want it to be.

As I said in Bible Study on Thursday, love is tricky, and if we're to do love right, it requires considerable effort, discernment, and self-knowledge. In other words, a lot of hard work. People who have been in long-term relationships know how much work goes into making a relationship life-giving for all the parties involved, and the place to begin that work is not with one of the human parties, but rather, with the divine party to every loving relationship, who is God.

I heard in an ordination sermon once that the job of a minister is to walk into a room and say the word God. Who else will do that, if not someone who has said yes to God's call on their life? It doesn't mean to be ostensibly pious; it means to bring into every gathering the name of the One who makes such gatherings possible through the gift of creation and all of creation's derivative gifts, including love. To say the word God is to remind ourselves of the depth of existence and that we are responsible not just to each other but also to the One by whose loving grace we are here at all – that anything is here at all. The first and most enduring sign of God's love for us is that we and everything around us exist. "Life is a gift to be received with gratitude," our Presbyterian Confession of 1967 states, "and a task to be pursued with courage." Unless we're being deliberately manipulative, we give gifts to those we love, and the gift of life in all its fullness and richness – living as a bearer of God's image – is the gift Jesus came to give us.

"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly," he promised us in John's Gospel, and we give life to ourselves and to others by loving – by saying the word God not only with our lips but especially with our actions. God is love First John tells us, which means that we bring God to others through our loving thoughts, words, and actions. The more we love – without any expectation of anything in return – the more we reveal what God looks like to a world increasingly reluctant to say the word God. To get love right, we have to start there – with God.

Love takes many forms, and in Scripture, love is closely tied to duty and obedience, two concepts that our free-wheeling age finds problematic. And so I want to close by telling you about something that happened to Francis and me last Wednesday afternoon that made the close tie between love and duty real to both of us.

We were up in my study working at the conference table, as we often are on Wednesday afternoons, when the recycling company arrived in their big truck to empty the bin. The driver wasn't aware, as he hoisted the bin over the cab of the truck, that the lid on the bed of the truck was still closed. And so paper went everywhere.

Francis and I saw what had happened and for a moment we wondered what to do. It was a brief moment, and fairly quickly we were headed downstairs to try to help the driver corral the blowing paper. Francis got push brooms from the garage and I pursued the runaways headed toward Mayfield Road. In twenty minutes or so, we had most of the blowing paper under control and where it was intended to be. That interruption wasn't how we'd planned to spend that time – we had a list in front of us needing attention before Francis leaves next month for his sabbatical – but we both knew what we had to do in the name of love: love of our campus, love of our neighbors, love for the hapless driver of the recycling truck, whom neither of us had ever laid eyes on before, and even love of ourselves because we did not want to let ourselves or each other down when it came to doing the right thing. We didn't, but we each could easily have said, "Thank you, Mom and Dad. Thank you, church. Thank you, God, for putting that kind of love in me."

Getting love right always starts in the same place: it starts with God. And so, again, the words of the apostle Paul, in paraphrase, informed by the first epistle of John: "God is patient, God is kind, God is not envious or boastful, arrogant or rude. God is not self-seeking, easily angered, or diligent about keeping track of wrongs. God doesn't take pleasure in evil but always delights in the truth. God always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres. God never fails."