

Love: The Greatest Power in the World

I Corinthians 13:1-13

January 28, 2007

As I begin this sermon today, I am admittedly stepping out on what some might perceive as thin ice. I have Christian brothers and sisters who will vehemently disagree with much of what I am going to say. But this is my view and I hope you will at least listen and try to understand my position. You may find it interesting, to say the least, that I use a colorful and controversial character to try to teach some truth. Maybe you will accuse me of trying to lead this congregation over the edge. Stick with me and we will see. We can always talk about it later.

A few years ago, a huge phenomenon hit the publishing world. His name was Harry Potter. J.K Rowling of Great Britain began to weave these wonderful stories of young Harry, a wizard in training at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I might as well confess to you right up front that I have read all of them: The Sorcerer's Stone, The Chamber of Secrets, The Prisoner of Azkaban, The Goblet of Fire, The Order of the Phoenix, and The Half-Blood Prince. The seventh and final volume is due to be published later this year, and I'm waiting.

There has been so much controversy surrounding these books. Many parents have embraced these books because they have actually gotten their children to read. Other parents are worried about the issues of witchcraft, which may be teaching our children harmful things.

I personally think that they are wonderful stories about friendship, loyalty, and the battles of good vs. evil. But I have tried to be sensitive to the issues surrounding the books. One of the things that those books did for me was to take me back to C.S. Lewis to read all of his "Narnia Chronicles;" another series of children's fantasy books that have had a great impact of a couple of generations of children now. I think that our children are smart enough to know what is real and what is fantasy. I think they know the difference between Disney Land and reality. Whether we are talking about Narnia's magical creatures or Hogwart's wizards, giants, and flying broomsticks, I think kids know the difference between those things and reality.

I took a couple of days away this week for a study retreat. I picked up and started to read a book titled, "If Harry Potter Ran General Electric: Leadership Wisdom from the World of Wizards" (Tom Morris. 2006. New York: Doubleday). The author says that "there is real wisdom to be found in each of these books about friendship, adversity, success, leadership, honesty, courage, loyalty, love, and ethics that can help anyone live a better and more accomplished life." Beneath all of the magic and suspense, the author says that "the real power that drives the Harry Potter stories, and indeed the human story – is love." That is the message of Professor Dumbledore when he tells Harry that, "Love is the greatest power in the world.

There is a lot of discussion among church growth experts today that one of the reasons that men are not attracted to the church in the same way that women are attracted, is that the church tends to use “soft” language and symbols. When the church talks about things like love, that language doesn’t speak to the masculine mindset. Men, they say, want to do “manly” things and use masculine language, but the church continues to use more feminine language. All this talk of “love” fits into the feminization of the church, they say.

The problem is, that this is the exact language the Apostle Paul uses, and I don’t think we can readily discount Paul’s masculinity. He traveled all over the Middle East and by his own accounts was under constant stress. In II Corinthians, he noted:

I’ve worked much harder, been jailed more often, beaten up more times than I can count, and at death’s door time after time. I’ve been flogged five times with the Jews’ thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Roman rods three times, pummeled with rocks once. I’ve been shipwrecked three times, and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day. In hard traveling year in and year out, I’ve had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes. I’ve been at risk in the city, at risk in the country, endangered by desert sun and sea storm, and betrayed by those I thought we my brothers. I’ve known drudgery and hard labor, many a long and lonely night without sleep, many a missed meal, blasted by the cold, naked to the weather. And that’s not the half of it, when you throw in the daily pressures and anxieties of all the churches. When someone gets to the end of his rope, I feel the desperation in my bones. When someone is duped into sin, an angry fire burns in my gut (11:23-29).

This was a man who was not by any stretch of the imagination, a sissy. He knew how to withstand tough times. He was a man’s man, yet at the same time could write to his churches with gentleness and grace and heartfelt love.

There were those in the Corinthian church at this time who were very proud of their spiritual gifts, especially the gift of speaking in tongues. That gift especially, was one they felt separated them from others who didn’t have the gift. If you remember the sermon from last week, you will recall that we spent some time in I Corinthians chapter 12.

In that chapter Paul wrote about the Body of Christ, which is made up of many different members with many different gifts. Among those gifts were: apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, healers, those with the gift of spiritual tongues, and those with the ability to interpret tongues. All are necessary, he said. All are important. But none are more important than the others. There are greater gifts than these, he said. Let me show you what they are.

For those of you who don’t know the Harry Potter story, let me tell you a little about him. When he was an infant, his parents were murdered by the evil Lord Voldemort. Harry’s

life was spared when his mother stood between the infant and Voldemort, giving her life for his. The encounter left a lightning shaped scar on Harry's forehead which is a constant reminder for him of the power of love to save. In each novel, we watch Harry continually put himself in danger in order to save his friends. Time and time again, he willingly faces danger to protect those he loves. None of the magical power he possesses can compare with the love in his heart, the greatest hallmark of his character.

I think that this was Paul's point exactly. As important all of the other gifts of the Spirit are, none can compare with love. Love is the greatest. Without love, none of the others make any sense or really mean anything at all.

If I speak with eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't have love, I am nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making all things plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump." And it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. If I give everything to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't have love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love (13:1-7).

A Native American medical student put it this way:

If I have language ever so perfectly and speak like a pundit, but have not the knack of love that grips the heart, I am nothing. If I have decorations and diplomas, and am proficient in up-to-date methods, but have not the touch of understanding love, I am nothing. If I am able to worst my opponents in arguments so as to make fools of them, but have not the wooing note, I am nothing. If I have all faith and great ideals and magnificent plans and wonderful visions, but have not the love that sweats and bleeds and weeps and prays and pleads, I am nothing. If I can heal all manner of sickness and disease, but wound hearts and hurt feelings for want of love that is kind, I am nothing. If I can write books and publish articles that set the world agog, but fail to transcribe the word of the Cross in the language of love, I am nothing.

When Paul talks about love, he is not speaking about surpy, Soap Opera love. He is not talking about a feeling. He is talking about love in action, love which is an act of the will, love which is a complete commitment to another without condition. It is a choice we make each and every day. It is a choice to act, not for ourselves, but for others.

Maybe it would help us define love in a more understandable way if we were to know what love is not. According to Paul, love is not something that gives up – never. No matter how hard it becomes to love someone, love keeps on loving. I have always said that the true nature of the church is known by the way that we love the unlovable. Love cares more for others than it does for itself.

Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always "me first." It is really easy to become arrogant and think of ourselves first, but that is not the way it is with true love. Love doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others. This is a hard one, isn't it? It is easy to carry grudges, foster old hurts, and be on the lookout for ways to seek revenge.

Doesn't revel when others grovel. I nursed an old grudge for a long time. I am pleased to report that I have been able to put this particular grudge behind me. But there was an incident in which the person who had so wounded me was facing mounting criticism and trouble in the church he was serving. My first urge, which I indulged for way too long, was to feel glad because I felt that he was getting what was coming to him. He was reaching out for help to his peers and colleagues, and I stood off at a distance, secretly happy for his circumstances...until I realized that he was hurting, his family was hurting, his church was hurting. I had to give up my anger, give up my grudge, and give up my feelings of superiority.

Another reason that love is the greatest gift in Paul's mind is because it never ends; never dies. The ability to be prophetic, to speak in miraculous tongues; to have extraordinary powers or abilities...all of these things, in the end are only temporary. Only love will last.

There is a special mirror at Hogwarts School that enables people who look into it to see their greatest desires. Harry's friend Ron looks into the mirror and sees himself as Hogwarts Head Boy. When Harry looks into the mirror, he sees himself standing with his family he has never known. When Professor Dumbledore looks into it, he sees himself...holding a nice thick pair of socks.

Paul says that we now stare into a dimly lit mirror. We can't see clearly. It is as if we are looking through a mist or a fog. But when Christ comes, we will see clearly, knowing God and being completely known by him.

As we live today, we get caught up in desire. We look in all different directions for self-worth, for achievement and acclaim, or for personal satisfaction. But those things are not to be found in magic formulas or enchanted mirrors. In the end, love that pushes us beyond ourselves and mirrors the love of God for this world is what will become our lasting legacy. Love will help us see ourselves as we are and others as God sees them. Such is the power that can change us, our church, our community, and our world.

In 1917 Mahatma Gandhi read I Corinthians 13 over and over again. When his supporters would begin to drift toward violence, he would tell them to read that passage. That year, he sent a copy of the chapter to his nephew. In his letter, he spoke about his ongoing struggle to become loving in the truest sense of the word. He said that love is a dagger. "If we could get hold of this dagger of love and get also the strength to stab ourselves with it, we could shake the world."

My hope is that we can become a world shaking church.