

February 3, 2013 / Season after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

The Way of Love

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 ...*the greatest of these is love.*

We are designed for the unfolding of God's love. --Elizabeth O'Connor

This morning we sang the words of Chapter 12 of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, which we considered two weeks ago. Paul spoke of the diversity of gifts, callings, and members of the community, each one essential, none more important than the other. True human community is like the human body itself--organic, interconnected, each part essential to the whole.

At the end of that chapter, Paul left us on a threshold. Strive for something even greater, he said. I will show you a more excellent way. It is the way of love, the love that comes from God, the love that IS God. It is the love in which and for which we are made. If we are working seriously with this life of a diversity of gifts and callings in community, we need to always be growing into the **life** of love. Willingness to grow in understanding and living out of love is what holds it all together and makes it work.

Paul uses the Greek word *agape*. Overall, it is the way we regard others, the world, and ourselves in light of God's own love for us and the world. This superior gift is to characterize every life and every community that calls itself by the name of Jesus. It is a gift because it comes from God, and cannot be achieved or earned. It is there, only be received. Yet we need to strive toward it, as Paul says, make an effort to open our lives to it. This love resonates with our truest nature. As Elizabeth O'Connor wrote: *we are designed for the unfolding of God's love in and through us.* This is the life that fulfills who we truly are.

Paul never directly or concisely defines this love. He never says, "Love is a feeling of affection for everyone and everything," or something like that. In fact, the love he means is not about feelings or affections. That is how our culture defines love. I just LOVE chocolate ice cream! I just LOVE my new car! Love based on feelings or affections is a flighty sort of love. Our emotions come and go, rise and fall. We "fall into" and "fall out of" love. We "love" someone until he or she does something we don't like, that doesn't fit the way we want that person to be. We do the same in community. We just "love" the community until our expectations or needs aren't met, until something is said or done that offends us. Then we withdraw. We go from relationship to relationship never getting it, never going deeper into

what love really is about. We have to finally come to the point where we understand it is not about others being what we want them to be, or the world being the way we want it to be. It is about our decision, desire, and commitment to understand and grow in love. I think that is why Paul says strive for this greater gift.

First Paul says that love is that without which nothing we do or accomplish amounts to anything real or lasting. Speaking in tongues was ecstatic speech, thought to be directly from God. It was, however, causing major problems in the Corinthian community. Those who did it saw themselves as REALLY spiritual! Nonsense, says Paul. No gift or ability that we have, no matter how wonderfully we do it, means anything if it is not infused with love. Prophetic vision, being able to see into the truth of things, means nothing if there is not love behind it and in it. Understanding of great mysteries or having vast knowledge of this and that? Our scientific knowledge brings many blessings. Yet when it is not coupled with love for the earth and people, with respect for how the universe works, it turns deadly, becoming a tool for greed and power. The kind of faith that can do wonders? Pure show, without love. Jesus was skeptical of people's faith when it was attached to his miracles. He wanted discipleship, not worshipers. Actions of astounding generosity and self-sacrifice can be very impressive and make us feel good about ourselves. Yet, without love, they are more about our egos.

These are very strong words! Much that we have been taught to value by culture, and by the church in many cases, in Paul's view is not worth much unless we are moving toward and growing in the life of love. If we make Christian faith and life into emotions, we missed the mark. If we make faith into having much knowledge about the scriptures, or religion, or politics, or even spirituality, it means nothing if we are not LIVING the love of God. If we adopt highly sacrificial lifestyles, it is not enough if we are not growing more fully into the love of God that seeks to be lived through us.

Paul then says love is known by how it ACTS, and how it does NOT. Patience, a willingness to endure over the long haul. A kindness that honors each person's being, because we recognize that each and all belong first to God. Love is free of envy and the need to call attention to itself. Love does not try to manipulate circumstances and people to come out its way. It is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice over acts that are harmful, dishonest, or immoral. It rejoices in truth, even when that truth is not comfortable, when it challenges us. Love remains open, not attached and clinging to a narrow and fixed view of things.

Love bears all things. Literally, the word used here means "roof" (*stegei*). It is not exactly clear what Paul means by using it. Maybe love provides a shelter, a refuge, helping us withstand things that are harmful and destructive. Or maybe love is a roof over all kinds of

people called together into community, who must learn what it means to “bear with” one another.

Love believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. This section of the reading speaks of love as a way of living that transcends our egos, the ways we bring harm to ourselves and others by our insistence that life be the way we want it to be. It is a non-clinging, non-possessing love for others that refrains from trying to “fix” people, or make them dependent upon us, or bend to our ideas of what is best for them. The persons whom I have found most truly helpful and loving have been those who have not tried to fix my problems or give me answers or tell me what I should do. Their caring honored and valued my life without interfering with what I needed to learn and experience and decide, even when it was painful. Their egos were not wrapped up in HOW I worked things out. Paul believed that encountering and following Jesus meant dying to the old small self, the ego, and being raised to the new larger self, the true self, the persons we are created to be. *Agape* is how this true self dwells in the world.

It has occurred to me, through experience as well as study and reflection, that the love Paul is talking about is something that arises in us as we make room for it, as we recognize and then drop what in us is NOT love. We can look honestly at things in ourselves and our actions that are not loving. We do not judge or punish ourselves for what we see, but take a deep interest in understanding ourselves. Our impatience? Our unkindness? Our resentments and jealousies? Our pushing to get our way? What are these things telling us about ourselves? About our fears? About our need to control? About our need to slow down? What I am trying to say is, we discover what love is and grow more loving as we let go of what is NOT love within us and in our actions and attitudes. Practicing compassionate, deeper understanding of ourselves enables us to let go. This is an important part of our inward journey work, and it doesn't happen quickly. We must be patient with and honor ourselves, as well. As we persist in this compassionate self-understanding and letting go, there is more room in us for love to emerge. The GIFT of love, remember?

I need to say something about what Paul calls the childishness of children. I don't take Paul as an authority on the nature of childhood or children. I hope we are finally learning that young children are NOT the way we have historically portrayed them -- self-centered little things that only really matter when they grow up. Those who work most closely with and pay attention to children know that Jesus was right about children -- they know what the kingdom of God is about; it already belongs to them; we are to become like little children if we are to be part of life the way God made it to be. I think Paul is trying to say that the way of love leads us from self-centeredness to interrelatedness, from narrowness of spirit to the broad

spirit that makes room for others, from our tendency to try to reduce, control, and possess life and people to a greater and greater letting go so that we can be loving participants in life.

The final portion of the reading says that love is never ending. The most frequent description of God in Hebrew scriptures is that God is **steadfast love** (*hesed*). It is and will always be there. Just as Paul said that the various gifts mean nothing without love, now he says that all of those gifts come to an end, except for love. He also says our lives are always in process, always growing and maturing, moving from the partial toward the whole and full. When we are striving in the way of love, we increasingly see our lives within the great mysterious process of life, from birth and death, growing and maturing. Our understanding of things, including love, is always partial, never complete or finished. We never “arrive”. It is a journey. Yet that journey takes place within, and is undergirded by, that which is and will always be there. Through all the changes of our lives, there is present in the core of life a love that leads us from the partial to the whole, from the hidden to the fully known. The love Paul speaks of is something we need to always be learning about and growing in. We need always to be reflecting, talking together, and seeking its fuller meanings. We need to ask and seek what it means to love in each situation and what it means to love this or that particular person.

A friend was going through a separation and divorce. He had been trained in and practiced Zen Buddhism. He felt the need to stay very close to his eight year old daughter, for whom the changing nature of life had now become very painful. On a regular basis they would sit together for tea, and talk. One day they were talking about what Buddhism calls the impermanence of life, that everything changes. My friend asked his daughter, “Can you think of one thing that does not change?” She looked up at her father and said, “Love.” In that moment, he told me, the teacher was slain by the student!

On the back wall of the chapel hangs a painting by Dede Buhler, which she gave to the community a few years ago. The title of it is *Ever Present Love*. It is the image of a love that continually shines upon us and all the creation, the whole universe, without regard for our deserving or not deserving it. It is a constant gift (*grace--karis*). It is the source of life and the power that draws life forward, always toward life. It is the love that enables us to be who we truly are and the community that Jesus called together. It is a love that never gives up, that accepts and yet continually calls us to the greater gift, the way of love itself.