

August 2nd, 2009

Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

The Kindness of Love

1 Corinthians 13:4 and Ruth 1:1-18

Pastor Tom Anderson

Good morning! My name is Tom Anderson and I am enthusiastic to be the new pastor at Houghton Lake United Methodist Church. It should be an easy adjustment for me coming from Houghton, all I need to do is learn how to spell “lake”!

This is a beautiful church in a beautiful country, nestled as it is among State and National forest lands. The air is clear, the rivers run free, the tall pines grow and the whippoorwill sings you to sleep. What a privilege to live here! I have been studying you from afar and I want to affirm all the signs of a healthy, vital congregation very much connected to the community and the world in Christian mission and witness. I want to affirm the solid lay leadership you have who have already reached out to Karen and me to make us welcome in so many ways. I really appreciate my predecessor, Rev Cal Long. He has been a solid leader and gave me a great orientation in this time of transition. Today is a day of new beginnings. We worship a God who is in the business of making all things new. It is with joyful hope that I anticipate sharing with you and God in the journey ahead of us. God is about doing wonderful things in this community and I pray that we can be apart of all of His plans.

I want to begin thinking about love with you today. Over the next few weeks we will explore together one of the greatest passages of scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 and what it says about love. According to Jesus, love is the greatest commandment: to love God and neighbor. Love is at the center of the gospel: “For God so loved the world that he sent his only son...” Jesus said that love is the tip-off for a disciple: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples that you love one another.” A tip-off is both a distinguishing mark—like the stripes on a skunk and the beginning of a basketball game. Love is the place we start and it is how we wish to be known as Christian believers.

1 Corinthians 13:4 says that love is kind. Kindness is defined as specific acts or words given to advance the welfare of others. Paul said that in Jesus Christ, “the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared.”(Titus 3:4) The kindness of God is not a mere

sentiment or a pleasant thought. It is the specific act of appearing in Jesus to teach, heal, forgive and save us. Our God is a God who truly delights in kindness.

One of the greatest illustrations of kindness in the Bible is the story of Ruth. Coming as it does after the cruel brutality found in the book of Judges, the story of Ruth stands out like the North Star on a clear sub-zero winter night. The story teaches us some of the principles of kindness.

The first principle of kindness is that it means taking an interest in others when there is no interest in it for you. A store clerk can be very helpful and I am glad when she is, but I also know there's a potential sale involved and she stands to personally and directly benefit from being helpful to me. But kindness is at its best when there is no direct, personal benefit. Ruth 1:11, "But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons who could become your husbands?" There was nothing in it for Ruth. She did what she did out of pure kindness to Naomi. This is love.

When I was 11 years old, I joined Boy Scout troop 1104 in Dearborn, Michigan. It was a huge troop of nearly 130 boys. I was four feet tall, pudgy and had buck teeth. Arriving on a Friday night for my first big campout, I was completely bewildered. Everybody was carrying tents and equipment to car trunks in the parking lot of the church and I had nothing to do and really didn't know anyone. I was thinking about calling it quits right there when the senior patrol leader by the name of Frank Lee called out my name. He said, "Is little Tommy Anderson here?" I was so surprised to hear my name and even more delighted that some really cool 16 year old high school athlete was calling out to me! It was an act of sheer kindness on his part and it sealed the scouting deal for me right then and there.

A second principle of kindness is that it means meeting the needs you see in others. Proverbs 14:31 says, "Whoever is kind to the needy honors God."

The late John Wimber was the founding pastor of the Vineyard Church in California. He received a complaint from a member one day. The man said something like this: "I was approached by a homeless man in my neighborhood for some help so I called the church office. The secretary said that it was late in the afternoon and no one was available to speak with me. So I wound up letting the guy sleep on the floor for the night.

The next morning I called right away, and I was informed that the staff were in a meeting and there wasn't really any one assigned to deal with these kinds of situations anyhow. I was really angry. I wound up feeding and housing the guy three more days until he got a check from the state. Pastor, I want to ask you, don't you think the church should help in situations like this?" Wimbers' response was simple, "It looks to me like the church did." Kindness is meeting the needs you see in others.

One last principle: kindness is determined. Ruth 1:18 says, "When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her." True kindness is insistent and is not easily brushed off or dissuaded. Naomi really needed help but like a lot of people who have needs or are deeply depressed she shooed people out of her life. That's the way human nature is. It's when we are hurting the most that we withdraw and retreat from the sources of help. We hurt so we quit coming to church. We hurt so we quit talking to Jesus. We hurt so we push away our friends. What's the sense in that? Kindness will not be shooed away. It is determined to help. Ruth's kindness finally wore Naomi down.

Delores was an elderly woman I knew years ago. She had no family. She was a chain smoker who in addition to lacking any of the social graces also lacked in the hygiene department. She lived in abject poverty in a broken-down old travel trailer on the edge of town. I held my breath as long as I could when I went to visit her. On top of all this Delores was fiercely independent and wouldn't take help from anyone. But the members of the church kept at her. Soon she was accepting rides to church, rides to the grocery store and to the doctor. A couple of months later she finally allowed a church member to help her balance her checkbook and straighten out her finances. Finally they prevailed upon her to move into low-income housing for which she most certainly qualified. On moving day the church worked a full day clearing out the trailer and getting her into her apartment. It wasn't pretty. For every load they took to the apartment a second load went to the dump. The church became her family that day and we became friends for life. Kindness is determined and insistent and it will not be shooed away.

Love is kind. Kindness is taking an interest when there is no interest. Kindness is meeting the needs you see in others. Kindness is determined. Thanks be to God who shows us his kindness through our Lord, Jesus Christ.