

February 14, 2010

Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

Something Very Special

Hosea 2:19-23 and I Corinthians 13:1-13

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It's very popular, this love thing. There will be many cards expressing various forms of love exchanged this week (today) and probably, a few special classified ads in the newspapers expressing, more publicly, valentine lovers' affection for one another.

And all year long songs of love will float over the airwaves; people will go to the movies and pick up magazines in order to enjoy 'love stories.' Love is very popular. It is so popular that businesses are always trying to capitalize on it. Once again in 2010, the United States Postal Service will issue a new "Love" stamp, Pansies in a Basket—that will be 25 or more now, I believe (beginning in about 1984).

And one time as I took one of my shirts off its hanger, I noticed that the hanger's paper covering had a red heart on it that said: "We love our customers." Can you believe it? Not that they'd print it, but that they meant it?

We are hungry for love and we value it. George Eliot wrote: "I want not only to be loved, but to be told that I am loved." We are eager to hear it and long to experience it.

But what is it? What is love? Valentine's Day is today. This is the season of love—or was Christmas the season of love... or is it Easter? Or is it the third Sunday in October (Sweetest Day), or the second Sunday in May or the whole month of June, or springtime when a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of love?

As a pastor I ought to have a few thoughts to share about love, for love is the primary ingredient of our Christian faith. It is one of the most important values in our society, or should be. (Is that an accurate statement?) But, what is it? It's bold of me to presume this, but let me try anyway.

I'll start by just mentioning a few words about love. How about the word exciting? Or the words: enchanting, enticing, energizing? (Those all start with the letter "E," how about that?) Would you use a word like intriguing – an exotic word – or just a simple word like warm: as in 'warm fuzzies'? Would you be likely to use the words romantic, affectionate, sentimental... or lavish, or exclusive (just the two of us)?

Or, moving in a different direction, how do these thoughts sound to you? "Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered (rude) or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail." (I Corinthians 13:4-7) So, if you were talking about love, would you be using words from the first group or the second group that I presented?

Next, let me sketch a few scenes for you. Love, remember, is the topic we're addressing.

1. It's an evening out for just the two of you. The night club isn't too crowded and it has plenty of atmosphere. You have a great meal and now the band is playing and you have a chance to dance. Before heading home, you take a walk along the beach in the moonlight together. —

2. You've given birth to this child and nurtured her through her early years. She's become a little expensive now, and somewhat demanding. To meet some of her needs or expectations, you'll have to go without some things on your personal list. But, you're willing to do that, in spite of her rebellious ways and seeming disrespect. You try hard to understand that she's just establishing her own identity. —

3. You have a job and a home and a couple of children, AND an elderly parent. He or she is in a nursing home about twenty minutes from your house by car. You go to visit faithfully, at least two times a week. You try to keep the conversation up-beat, with very little cooperation from your parent. He complains. She whines. And because your parent is forgetful, you know he/she feels like no one ever visits or loves him/her and that you shouldn't leave so soon. You squeeze his/her hand, give a hug and a kiss, and pick up the laundry—including the soiled underwear—and head for home, promising to return in a few days. —

4. Your husband works hard at his job, and is a good provider, of the basics, anyway, but he has almost no motivation at home. Sure he does most of the traditional "men's" jobs around the house, but he doesn't help you cook or do the laundry or clean, even though you work full time too. He "expects" you to wait on him... And you do, even though it doesn't seem fair. —

5. Your son is asking you for money, AGAIN. He's 37 years old, divorced, and has no children (luckily)... no job either. Oh, he may have a job now, but he's had dozens of them, and they never seem to last more than a couple of weeks. He says that he needs the money, \$300.00, for something important. You've heard this story before, but you're not sure how he spent it last time. This time, you tell him "No," you won't give him the money. —

6. You are at a social gathering. Either the people you're with are friends or business associates. You want them to think well of you. But they get on a topic that is more than a little irreverent. You consider just ignoring it and hope that it will stop shortly. As it continues, you think about excusing yourself for ten minutes or so. But, you decide to give your two cents worth, instead... No, by golly, not your two cents worth, but your Christian witness to the inappropriateness of this conversation, and thereby to risk the smart remarks and the disfavor of the group.

Well, what is it? What is love?

It is not words, that's for sure. Words can be used to communicate, but they can be also be used to mislead people. St. Exupry in his book, The Little Prince, said: "Words are the source of misunderstanding."

Don't get taken in by all the talk. — When I was in seminary, I had a chance to spend an evening with a group gathering on campus. Some group sponsored the evening and provided a speaker as well as refreshments. The person who spoke was some sort of 'world traveler.' And as I listened to him, I tried to decide if he was someone with a genuine message or just a bag of wind. I searched his presentation for a question to ask him to help me decide. At the given time I asked him something and he responded.

But I still couldn't figure out if he was real or not. Can you tell, by listening to someone? Don't you have to be with someone, for a length of time, and observe their behavior, as well as listen to them, in order to know, or even guess intelligently about their genuineness? Or are you gifted in sorting out the frauds fairly quickly, based on what they say? One of Yogi Berra's bits of wisdom, "You can observe a lot by watching."

A recent TV commercial had a man and a woman sitting together at a table in the bar and she said to him, "I love you." Feeling a definite need to respond he tried to get the words "I love you too" out but couldn't. They stuck in his throat; he couldn't do anything but stammer. Just then the waitress came by and asked if she could get him another drink. And in a loud, clear voice he answered, "I'd love one." Seeing where she stood, his date got up and left.

There is a great need to sort out our love talk, to discover what another means by what he/she says, to distinguish what level of love they are expressing. I think that experiencing someone in more than conversation will help me distinguish better.

Well, how does one who loves act? The Apostle Paul says, not selfishly. And if no one has ever seconded his motion, I will right now. You can talk about the value of self love and I think I know what you mean. But out of concern that such love of self might slip into selfishness, I'd rather call it something else... like self esteem. This important concept, self-love, needs a different name so it doesn't get confused with love, which should never be mixed up with selfishness. Oscar Hammerstein II wrote: "Love isn't love till you give it away." Love is not selfish. — Don't fall prey to the phrase: 'If you really loved me, you'd, etc.

Love conceives of and desires what is best for another. It is considerate. Love makes its decisions with the good of others clearly in mind. Love binds us to others. Love isn't afraid to commit itself. Love promises to care for others. Love is bound rather than blind. — It was his love for Jesus and Mary that caused the disciple, John, to accept Jesus' request to care for his mother as he died on the cross. Love takes care.

Love is willing to bear the costs, to make sacrifices for those loved. Love enables us to move beyond justice, to higher levels. Love is forgiving. God is love. In his small book, Loving Is, compiled by Gilbert Hay, one entry says: "Love a man even in his sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love, and is the highest love on earth." (Page 59)

Love doesn't trifle. It will not be prostituted, if it wants to continue to be love. To say we love pop corn or baseball is to use the word love too lightly. We enjoy those things. But we love our child, our spouse, our God. And, if we have a relationship of love we engage ourselves in it faithfully, or else it loses the quality of love.

Love is something very special. It is only love in that it is valued highly, prized above other more ordinary things and experiences. Of faith, hope, and love, the Apostle Paul wrote, love is the greatest. "The greatest tragedy of life," W. Somerset Maugham wrote, "is not that men perish, but that they cease to love." We simply cannot afford to water it down, or to lose it. We must prize it, respect it, greatly.