

Serving in Love

Jeremiah 1:4-10; I Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30; Psalm 71:1-6 1-28-07

Have you ever volunteered to do something, or been volunteered to do something, only to find, as you went along, that the job was not at all what you expected or wanted it to be? As you kept pulling things together, everything became more and more complex and more and more time consuming if the job was to be done right. If you are anything like me, I am sure you wished at some point you had not been so quick in raising your hand. But, if we labor on, we often find a place in our journey toward a specific goal in which our perceptions change and we begin to love what it is we are doing.

Many throughout the pages of our Bible resisted the call God issued them. Moses tried to tell God he could not speak well and was not a good candidate to lead the nation Israel. Next week Isaiah will resist saying he is not the one God wants because he is a man of “unclean lips.” And, this week, Jeremiah resists for a moment or two, before reminding God that he is too young for the job of prophet.

But God is not fooled and once our Creator taps a person on his or her shoulder and that person gives in to the persistent call, he or she often grows to love the work, as trying as it may be.

Jesus ran into opposition from the minute he began his public ministry. He understood the resistance he would encounter in his own hometown. People knew him well and his humble origins. No miracles were worked there. He cited the examples of two others called into the service of God who could not work miracles on their own people. In spite of these failings and the anger stirred up by them, Elijah and Elisha and Jesus persisted in love to do their work.

Having deep love or a passion for what we do in life is a wonderful thing. It moves us to great heights no matter what it is we want to accomplish. This applies to everything. Whether we want to be a great baker, or knitter, or carpenter, or nurse, or teacher, or doctor, or lawyer or Indian chief. Passion and love are the elements that drive us forward. When we don't have this kind of passion, a job becomes a job, something to do, get paid for and walk away from at the end of the day. On the other hand, having passion drives us forward all the time.

Of course, all these preliminaries bring us to Paul's well-known and loved reading from I Corinthians. We love it because it is beautiful. It speaks to us. We listen and think of how nice it is and often move on without giving a thought of putting its words into practice. These few verses provide us with a veritable guidebook to living life in a manner that is pleasing to God and that celebrates a passion for loving.

If we practice what Paul tried to tell that messed up church in Corinth, as individuals and as a body of Christ, we will find our lives changing. There is no helping it. Of course, sometimes all the love we extend to a person or group of people may never be returned. Paul encountered this, at times, with the Corinthians. That does not mean we are to give up. Perhaps, it means we need to look for someone or some place else to try to sow the seeds of love. But if we act and react in a spirit of love, we will become better persons. Paul is writing of agape and filial love—those forms of love that are broader than romantic love. However, his thoughts apply to all forms of love.

What does Paul say? First, that we are nothing without love. Loving and being loved are two of the greatest treasures in life. Even when we feel we are not loved we need to remember that the love of God for all God's creation was shown to us through Christ. God loves us. Sometimes we wonder why, but God does.

Second, he goes on to list the characteristics of love. “Love is patient, it is kind.” It costs us nothing to have a little patience with others, to set aside the rush we are always in to listen and reflect with another person. And it costs us nothing to be kind. Instead of being sharp or nasty or judgmental, we need to see one another as part of God’s world, as beings as treasured as we are. When we begin to look at others like this, we see things differently. The worst, most annoying person in our lives can be handled if we have within us patience and a bit of kindness.

“Love is not envious or arrogant or boastful or rude.” In this it is a great leveler. Life is not a game in which we try to not only keep up with the Joneses but to pull ahead of them in things acquired. Too often we bemoan the fact that our glass seems half empty while someone else’s is half full. If we stop and take a look at those we envy, we often see that our lives are just as good as theirs. This should not make us arrogant or boastful and certainly not rude. We have become increasingly rude as people. We are losing the respect we have for others and often do anything and everything we can to put them down to raise ourselves up. Change in this arena takes place when we all simply stop being rude and refuse to accept this kind of behavior in others.

“Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.” Oh, boy—how many marriages and relationships would be improved if we learned to put another before ourselves. It is not “all about me,” as much as we would like it to be. We often think a new person or a new relationship will make all things better. We forget that, when we think this way, we carry the same person we are along with us no matter where we go. The new love will go the way of the old if we continue to practice love for ourselves only. Life would also be better if we did not rejoice in wrongdoing by keeping “little mental lists” of the errors of others. We all know about those little lists that we pull out so readily to remind others of the times they have failed. Get rid of them.

Paul goes on to say that love “bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” And it does. We can put up with a lot if we love another person or group of people, or a whole community. If we can look at others and realize that they are fine right where they are in life’s journey and that they will become better, eventually, we can go on in hope.

As we mature we begin to see the truth in Paul’s words. What we see dimly we grow to see more clearly. And we learn that faith, hope and love abide but the very greatest of them all is love.

These words should speak to all of us right where we are in time and space. For, there is no time like the present, to begin to change ourselves into more loving, accepting humans who desire to follow the will of God for our lives. In fact the present is all we have. We never know when this journey will be all over. If we think we can delay in putting love into practice we are wrong. For, all of us should feel the persistent tapping on our shoulders of a God who loves us and wants us to live life loving our Creator and all others in return.

Amen