

I Thessalonians 4:9-5:28
I Peter 1:22-23
I John 3:13-20; 4:7-12

LOVE OF THE BRETHREN

Thanksgiving Day will be here in a few weeks. I had some desire to speak to you about how giving thanks cures depression, gloom, pride, greed, some doubt, and quite a bit of fear. But it seemed to me that we have been on those themes enough recently – that anybody who wants to has heard the message and is already moving to become a more thankful person.

I did have occasion myself, a few days ago, to spend about thirty hours with nothing better to do than contemplate what I am most grateful for. The impact was so great that I realized that if I could do this every month or two, I would probably become a saint. Sadly, I also realized that I have neither the good sense nor the spiritual maturity to build such a discipline into my normal schedule.

Words only hint toward truth, but I found myself profoundly grateful for the love of God that means I don't have to live in fear anymore. Among the other things I found myself grateful for, I was surprised at the amount of gratitude I felt toward you. I am thankful for many of you as individuals, and also for you as a group, a people: the people who make up "my" church – the people who make it possible for me to live in a faith community. It is a paradox of our age that churches are everywhere but that faith communities are not easy to find.

I don't know how it feels to you, but it came very clear to me that my life would be bereft if I could not live in a faith community. Do not suppose that means I will never be angry, disgusted, disappointed, or eager to make changes in our life together here ever again. We don't do it perfectly. You worry me when attendance drops or study groups cease to meet just because I'm not here. Do you stop praying too? Is Jesus no longer important because I'm away? Are you no longer important to each other, or no longer engaged in the mission of the church, if I am gone?

Oh yes, there are still things that are tentative, even half-hearted, about our commitment to Christ and the bonds of our fellowship in His church. Do you think I mean *you* any more than myself? Not at all.

We are human, and we live in an imperfect world. We have doubts and scars from our experiences, and we are children of an era during which the church has given some very mixed and confusing signals.

Some of the marks of our tentative commitments are also the marks of our honesty, and they show us where we are; Christ uses even that to help us and teach us on the WAY. But what came clearer than ever before is that I am grateful for you not in spite of this, but because of this. In my own confusion and doubt, I need and want to be part of a faith community that is more honest than right; that is more interested in finding the real God than in looking good; that is more eager to learn what it really means to walk with Jesus than to find ecclesiastical fame or success.

So I am grateful to be among an imperfect people who nevertheless want to find the Christ again – and not just in somebody else’s creed, but for themselves – that they may learn, step-by-step, how to live with Him, and for Him. In this place, despite all our problems and imperfections, we do also make covenants with each other, and with our Lord. If they are not always as high as Heaven or as beautiful as Shakespeare’s sonnets, nevertheless we mean them, and walk by them. So we learn and grow, and Jesus helps and heals us more and more, and we become more His church as we go.

So I find myself grateful, this thanks-giving time – deeply and profoundly grateful – for the Christ, and for you. It is enough. I find myself strangely happy at last. I long to do more, and the more grateful I become, the worse that gets. But it is also enough. If I get to go on doing what little I can, each day as it comes, finally that is enough. The monkey is finally starting to climb down off my back. I hope yours is too. It sure does make for incredible thanks-giving.

If this all sounds a little too nice, a little too “up,” remember that I also just got back from Israel. You know what that does to me. Just a few days ago, I was standing in the streets of ancient Capernaum again – seeing the remains of houses that stood there when Jesus lived there – looking at the ruins of a synagogue that must have been where His “home” synagogue was. He had healed and taught in every village in all the slopes around there, had called fishermen from the villages along the shore of the lake stretching out before me – and the whole story came crashing in on me once again.

Jet-lag is fun for me, but Israel-lag is another matter. I have not fully recovered from last year, and this year hit even harder than last year. So if I hug you a little more tenderly or speak with more sentiment than good sense, be patient for a while. Maybe ... maybe I will get over it, with time.

When I left, we were talking about the Road to Antioch and the road to Christian community. I finished a series of sermons on that subject before I left. This one is a leftover. Some of us like leftovers; some of us don't. It is usually all we ever give to God. In any case ...

I want to tell you what I think is wrong with the church's vision of itself today, because I think that could help us to see and claim a clearer purpose and a higher hope in our own "here and now."

Let me suggest then that it is the modern liberal church's concept of "love" that is choking it to death. Love is, of course, our central theme. We think of it as our message, and we hope it is also our product. Not that we produce it, but we claim that God's love is revealed to us in Jesus Christ – and that this transforms us from within, and is what we also want to proclaim and make available to others.

Because love is our theme and aim, we are always singing its praises, speaking of how it is to be applied, and calling each other to give more time and money – that we may demonstrate and show love in various situations. So we talk about "becoming more loving" as our proper response at all times and in all situations. Therefore, if anyone speaks a word against love or suggests that trying to be more loving is not always appropriate, it sounds and feels like blasphemy in the church.

I know that the theory is incontrovertible. I also know that if you all meant what I mean by love – or if all of us could agree on what Jesus meant by love – our truth would be clear again. The fact (as I see it) is that the modern church's ideas about love are choking it to death.

When the church keeps telling people today to apply love in all their circumstances, most people are not hearing what that used to mean. If you live with a tyrant as a boss or spouse or parent, and you go to your church and it sends you back to be more "loving," what does that *mean*? Does it mean swallow it? Confront? Fight? Forgive? What

does “forgive” mean? Capitulatate, knuckle under, stop thinking you have any worth or rights?

If the church can no longer use its best words without total confusion and complete misunderstanding, what has happened to us? What has happened is: the concept has become so nebulous, so general, so glib and ethereal that there is very little love left in the church, and very little *strength* to love coming *out* of the church.

The teaching – the understanding – of the church today seems to be that “love of neighbor” is the function of the church and that everybody is the neighbor. Therefore, it makes no difference whether I’m thinking about you, my children, the fellow who lives across the street from me, someone in prison for rape and murder, an Arab in Nablus, or a Hindu starving near the Ganges River. I am supposed to feel the same concern, have the same regard, and show the same amount of compassion and caring for each and all. Am I also supposed to act as strongly and decisively in each case?

The Christian Faith drives us to that conclusion because God’s love includes everyone – because Christ died for all. If you could take any one of us individually to any of those people as individuals, and if time and life gave us a chance to relate, they should feel and hear from us that we know and believe that God cares about them and has plans for their lives if they will believe it – if they will cooperate with the inner voice of the Holy Spirit trying to reach them, just as the Spirit tries to reach each of us.

That is the truth and the power of the Gospel, and we are each supposed to know it and carry it and spread it. So what is my complaint? It seems to me that the way the church speaks of this love and comprehends its application has turned it into weak mush. Love, as the Christian church teaches it today, has no integrity. It is no longer the dynamism of a personal and passionate caring that changes a person’s life and calls them also into personal and passionate caring. It has degenerated into an institutional theory that grants everybody some kind of “right” to wonderful treatment, no matter what they do or say. And we think the mission of the church is fulfilled by simply calling all of us to support bloodless institutional approaches and programs that vaguely rest on this theory that everybody should be treated with a general flavor of concern and good will. But who is doing real loving, and who is receiving real love?

Years ago, when I first began to discover that Mariana maybe loved me, it had a huge impact on my life. There was some anguish mixed with the joy, to be sure. (Can you remember back that far?) But I really did know that something IMPORTANT to me was going on.

Let us be clear: Christianity has some pretty strict rules, for some very good reasons, about the amount of sexuality that is to be expressed in our love-bonds within the fellowship of the church. But if you are loved – by God – you ought to *feel* something! If we love each other, we will also *feel* something, don't you think? It will be one of the most powerful realities in our lives.

For the most part today, the people of the church back the church's programs with approximately the same kind of enthusiasm that matches a general "welfarism" approach which expects very little authentic change and requires very little from its recipients. I'm saying that when the atmosphere is dull and the results are dull, we have reason to suspect that something has dulled the concept itself.

Welfarism is money without labor. The integrity is lost. Value is exchanged for no value. No goods or services come in return for the value. If there is deep and authentic gratitude in awareness of the value given, then eventually value will come back. The injustice will be repaired and the wounds healed. Otherwise, the damage will increase until it destroys. Welfarism, if it grows – if, instead of help in time of trouble, it becomes a way of life – will destroy the state. Before that, it will destroy the people who succumb to its way of valuelessness. What irony. Because you are important, we will support you even though you don't produce; therefore, you are worthless. No matter how many reasons or rationalizations we use, if we receive without giving, we turn bitter, and soon nothing green grows near us. (Yes, I was recently at the Dead Sea.)

Spiritual welfarism is love without relationship. That is the kind of love which is choking the church to death. The Thanksgiving basket; the help that carries no invitation to a different life; the money that asks nothing in return; the kind of caring that doesn't want to know you or be with you – it is a killer compassion. It reverses the old phrase, "It kills the soul but not the body." A more overt and obvious evil is far easier to handle.

Sex without love is an abomination. We have bad words for it like “prostitution,” “licentiousness,” and “lust,” which is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Genuine or true love is the virtue at the center of LIFE. What is at the other end of the spectrum? *Agape* without affection – love without relationship. It is an evil just as grievous, but we have no bad names for it and we have precious little awareness of its dangers. Therefore, it kills the church and no one sounds the alarm.

What happens in the church is that we get enamored of our high theories and forget that they rest on foundations of integrity and reality. Maybe I can get that clearer.

If I join the church and if you join the church, we have signed up to learn to love each other. That means we covenanted to relate to each other, get to know each other, argue and work and care and sing and pray and sometimes fight with each other. If we do not do that – if we do not come to care for and love each other – then we do not have anything to give that the Christian church cares about. We are not yet about what Christianity is about. Any love we talk about or offer or invite others to come be part of stands on a foundation of personal relationship, friendship, and affection, or it is a lie. All genuine love has to have an “I” on one side of it and a “you” on the other.

From my perspective, the church has been so busy (in most places) trying to talk and act loving in the face of all of the world’s needs, that it has spent less and less time on its relationships. Spiritual welfarism is love without relationship. The integrity is gone. The power is missing. Nobody is getting changed. It is a charade, a shell game.

Our Scripture reading today had some marvelous passages about the brethren, from among the 191 places where the New Testament talks about the subject. (I should have read Romans 12:10, where Paul says, “*Put a little affection into your love of the brethren.*”) We have whole denominations named in honor of the special relationship that is supposed to exist between “the brethren.” We cannot use this word anymore because of its masculine, exclusive flavor to modern ears, but in the old language, it simply meant the faithful community, the congregation, the other people you shared the faith with. (We cannot use the word “cistern” either. That refers to whole rooms – some as large as this whole sanctuary – hewn out of solid rock to hold water. See, I’ve been to Masada, Hazor, and Megiddo too.)

The point is: The fellowship of the brethren was an enormous part of the early church's reality, pattern, expectation, functioning. For the most part, people today don't even notice this category and dimension of our faith. What is the difference between your relationship with your secular friends and your relationship with the brethren? What guidelines do you follow when dealing with an enemy, in distinction from dealing with one of the brethren? Are you clear in your mind about how you want to treat and deal with people at work, in contrast to the way you want to deal with and treat the brethren?

"I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1) That is a very high passage, but would Paul make such a statement to anybody *except* the brethren?

I am trying to say that there is a whole layer of life – a whole dimension of acting, feeling, thinking, relating, striving – that is appropriate with the brethren, and nowhere else. If we have no brethren, no congregation, no faith community, we cannot experience this whole layer of life and growth. Yet this dimension of life is nearly lost in our day because the churches, in their very understandable concern for all the problems of the world, have forgotten the distinction, or they have decided they don't have time for Christian community anymore. They think it's selfish and self-centered for us to be nurturing ourselves or enjoying our own relationships in Christ. We must be out saving the world. We must be doing something about all the pain and trouble everywhere around us.

The motive, as usual, has been good and understandable. But in most places, we have lost the disciple bands and the congregations of Christian friends that have given us the power to make a difference in the first place. A movement about love that no longer fosters loving relationships between its members is not going to help anybody in this world very much, for very long.

Is this a call for all of us to focus more on our covenant bonds *with* and our caring *for* each other? Yes it is. To move from theory to reality, we have to get specific. We need to get into each other's homes and lives more. It IS happening, thank God. Occasionally we design an event to try to make it easier. When those programs come along, I hope you will cooperate every way you can. But you don't have to wait for them.

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That's why I am preaching this sermon: To remind you that every member of this church has promised to be your friend, and you have promised to be theirs. You maybe didn't notice, and they probably didn't either, but the promise is there: To love each other as Christ has loved us. Start calling on it with each other – testing it, trying it on, calling it forth. Get a little risky, a little daring, a little creative. What if you goof? What if you bother somebody? What if you make somebody angry? You can always call on their forgiveness. That's part of the contract too. But don't wait any longer. Love each other. It is the direct command of our Lord.