

"40 Days of Love - A Lenten Adventure"

Sermon by Robert Lee Hill

Text: I Corinthians 13

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I. The Power of One Little Word

One little word. One tall lanky cipher, and three small, squatty other letters, and not a guttural consonant among them. A word uttered glibly in moments that don't really deserve its usage. (*"I just ___ your new fur coat!"*) A word that stutters on too many tongues of those who know what it feels like but who cannot give expression to its reality in their lives. (*"I just wanted to say that I ... I ... I ... I mean I want to say that I You know what I mean anyway!"*) A word that makes the world go 'round. A word which the world does not yet hardly know, or know well enough, or know at all, given the ravaging ways human beings have devised to harm and hurt one another.

In all languages and at all times it is a noun which is neither person, place, or thing. And yet it is also verb, of both the transitive and intransitive kinds. It is an event that can involve affection but it can happen without a single touch. It suffuses the hearts of those who yearn to serve country and homeland and local community and it fills the sails of those seeking the sights of other shores.

It develops, of course, in families, but also in book clubs, neighborhood associations, 1st grade and 2nd grade, and even in the "17th grade" (otherwise known as graduate school). It evolves over years and happens in seconds. It can be sung and it can be felt but it can never be ultimately denied.

To it some of the most unique sociological customs have accrued. To it some of the most unusual historical traditions have become attached. (Think chocolate, flowers, incurring wild indebtedness for pieces of jewelry, throwing petals of flowers on the ground, kneeling when you speak with someone, etc.)

It goes beyond human logic and reason; it is part of God's magisterium of mysterious grace. And yet it is as human and as daily as paying a bill, changing a diaper, setting a table, doing the laundry, and making a phone call.

It is blessing and benediction. It is mandate and magnificence. It is the equilibrium to which all disruptions eventually, finally return. It is the disruption of each and every status quo.

It compels the most profitable day imaginable for florists on Valentine's Day. And yet, in its essence, it cannot be packaged or purveyed, nor can it be bought or sold or compromised.

You remember the word, don't you? It's the word "Love."

II. The 40 Days of Lent = 40 Days of Love

The season of Lent - the 40 days stretching from Ash Wednesday to Easter (minus the Sundays in between, since they aren't regular days but rather "Little Easters") - provides Christians some of the richest opportunities for the deepening of faith. This year our theme for the Lenten season is "**40 DAYS OF LOVE.**" It will truly be an adventure as we love ourselves every which way, or as a dear friend likes to describe such extravagance, as we love each other "to a fair-thee-well." I hope and trust you'll participate in as many of Community's Lenten occasions as you possibly can. Our Lenten program this year really has been designed to provide something for everybody. And all of us can always use and share and live out more love.

III. "Loving Our Neighbors"-Wednesdays at Noon

Our Lenten midweek noonday services will offer encouragement and affirmation from a variety of "neighboring" pastors, as we center our attention on the theme of "*Loving Our Neighbors.*" You will be lovingly blessed as you listen to the insightful homilies from our guest speakers: Fr Matthew Ruhl (from St. Xavier Catholic Church); Rev. Spencer Barrett (from Bethel A.M.E. Church); Dr. Tarris Rosell (from the Center for Practical Bioethics); Rev. Dawn Weeks (from Raytown Christian Church); Rev. Stan Runnels (from St. Paul Episcopal Church); and our own Rev. Dara K. Cobb.

There's an old saying about the ecumenical riches among various Christian denominations that goes like the following: If we could be "strangely warmed" in our faith like the Methodists, if we could do everything "decently and in order" like the Presbyterians, if we could enthusiastically express our emotions in worship like the Pentecostals, if we could nail our theological convictions upon ornery doors like the Lutherans, if we could appreciate liturgical movement and appeals to the senses like the Catholics, if we could be as devoted to peace as the Quakers, if we could practice the openness of communion like the Disciples, if we could plumb the depths of the Bible for a wide variety of interpretations like the Baptists, and if we could pay for it all like the Episcopalians, then *that would be some kind of church!*

And if we will but listen to our "neighboring" pastors when they ponder about the theme of "Loving Our Neighbors," then we will surely be better off in

our faith and that will make for *some kind of movement* of grace among us!

IV. "The Love of God" - Wednesday Evenings

You're also invited to be inspired by some of leading theologians and seminary teachers in the area as the Lenten Wednesday evening services focuses on the theme of "*The Love of God.*" We start off with our dear friend Dr. Mike Graves (professor of Preaching and Worship at Central Baptist Theological Seminary). Then we will be blessed by the premier Pauline scholar in all of the Midwest as we hear from Dr. Mark Nanos (faculty member at Rockhurst University). Then two seminary presidents will bless us, Dr. Myron McCoy (of St. Paul School of Theology) and Dr. Molly Marshall (from Central Baptist Theological Seminary). Dr. Mike Graves will sum up our journey through these various considerations of "*The Love of God,*" with one final message at the conclusion of our Wednesday evening services before we arrive at Holy Week.

IV. Two Urgent Requests

As we listen and take in the various perspectives from our guest speakers about love, I have two urgent requests for us.

First, let what you've learned about love be expressed in loving service to others. During the Lenten season, we're asking all Community members (and friends) to perform eight hours (or more) of volunteer service. The eight hours may include your regular volunteer service, or it may be something new. Whatever your activity, please inform the church office of your efforts so that we can track the number of hours. Children and youth are especially encouraged to participate in this exciting opportunity. Can you imagine what sort of impact Community could have in a mere six week period if each of us exerted enough loving effort for eight hours of volunteer service? It would surely amount to enough hours for eight persons' worth of annual labor!

Or you may want to participate in the New Orleans Mission Trip, headed up by Rev. Kelli Driscoll, leaving on March 18 and returning March 23. The work will take place in Houma, Louisiana, 40 miles southwest of New Orleans.

Or you may want to start your dreaming and make your plans for the Youth Mission Trip to the Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries in Los Fresnos, Texas. This will be a wonderful time serving in the spirit of Jesus Christ with the people who live at the border of the United States and Mexico.

Secondly, participate in the Sunday evening Bible study gatherings on March 4, 11, 18 and 25. We'll gather in members' homes for Bible study, discussion and fellowship. The New Testament book of Romans will be the gathering focus, and a study guide will be provided for all participants. These

four consecutive Sunday evenings of concentrated Bible study during March will enrich your understanding of love as it relates to your faith, and the connections with other Community members will strengthen your friendships.

I offer these urgent requests not merely as advertisements, which they unabashedly are! I'm urging your participation in the Lenten worship, study, service, and fellowship opportunities, because, to borrow a favorite phrase of Dr. Jim Forbes at Riverside Church, it is only when we "*tangibilitate*" our love, that it becomes truly a holy encounter. We are all like the little girl who desperately needed to sleep next to her mother on a cold, rainy, thunder-riddled, lightening-lit night. It wasn't enough to say her prayers and know she was protected by her house, by God, and by her parents in the next room. She needed "*some love with some skin on it!*" The world needs "*some love with some skin on it,*" our skin. So I urge you: "*tangibilitate*" what you learn about love by actually loving others in study and service.

V. Conclusion: The One Who Is All Love

And don't ever forget what the apostle Paul wrote about love to the church at Corinth. Paul's genius insights in his love hymn in I Corinthians 13 declare love's powerful essence.

Without love, the symphony known as the human family - with its multitude of instruments - might just as well be a cacophony of cymbals.

Without love, all our efforts at understanding and prediction are merely the dusty chalk marks of empty equations and paltry propositions, containing neither sound nor fury, signifying even less than nothing.

Without love, our endeavors to show ourselves righteous or pure or good or correct or proper or achieving or dutiful or triumphant are but vain-glorious exercises which vanish like fog eluding the grasp of our hands.

The "*more excellent way*" of love which Paul pleads with the Corinthians to embrace and be embraced by is the same love that is available to us. And as with the Corinthians back then, it will change your life and my life and our life together in ways that can surely be called holy. For while this love is not our original creation, it is for our fruition. This love was at the foundation of the world, the beginning of time, the point of origination for all that is. This love is the well of life that never runs dry. It is the guiding star whose shining beauty never fails to enchant and inspire. It is the touch of reconciliation that never fails to heal and save. Love is the great gift that God wants to give each one of us this Lenten season and always.

When we hear Paul's cataloguing of love's characteristics - kindness,

patience, humility, consideration, hopefulness, endurance, everlastingness and all the rest - we're beholding not only our highest good, our noblest traits when we are at our best. We're really being given a peek into the heart of God's great love, God's loving characteristics, the very nature of who God is and how God relates to and with us. And this is great good news: God's love is immense and huge and wonderful.

How big is God's love? How immense? How sacrificial? How lavish? How grand? It's almost indescribable in human language. But, in addition to Paul's "Love Hymn" in I Corinthians 13, John's gospel portrays it well: ***"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him."*** (John 3:16-17)

Let it be so. AMEN.