

February 3, 2019

1 Corinthians 13: 1-8a

Rev. Larry C. Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“This Is It”

Love isn't just a thing. Love is THE thing. Well, it's not a thing, really, but I was thinking of it that way as I remembered a saying I learned years ago from a Christian colleague. I've shared this somewhere along the way but it's back in my mind this morning. A pastor friend often said that when it comes to the church we've got to remember this: the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. Did you get that? It's important in the church and it's important in our lives, too. The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. It's just a fact that we are easily distracted. Our attention wanders. We're pulled toward information coming from over there or a situation that emerges here or an immediate need or a long-term struggle that grabs our focus. Then we're pulled this way or that way, and whatever grabs us has our attention for a time or until we notice something else, and then the whole distracted process starts over again

This past week Kelly and I were full-time grandparents, caring for Nora, our 21-month-old granddaughter. Her parents were away for the week. We loved this focused time with her but she wore us out because of her lack of focus. When it comes to attention hers is fast paced and constantly changing. She kept moving and so did we, from books, to blocks, to snacks, to songs, to dancing, to rolling on the floor, to practicing climbing and jumping, and on it went. When it comes to a focused life we give a toddler a pass because scattered attention is part of the plan. It's the way a one-and-a-half-year-old learns, but what about us? In the process of becoming persons of faith, the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. God calls us to focus. What follows then is to recognize that the main thing, as taught by the Apostle Paul; the main thing, as demonstrated in the life and mission of Jesus; the main thing, as lifted up in the scriptures from the beginning of the bible to the end, is love. This is it. It is love. Now, the bible tells us God is love. And so we, as God's people, are involved in this divine love. In fact, we are rescued by it. We are saved by it. We are given life because of it, and then we are called to remain in love with one another through Christ. There is always some risk in boiling down complex ideas to a simple word or two but when we think about our life with God it can be wrapped up in one word. It is simple. At least, it is clear. So, let's clarify. The hope of our faith isn't that we would believe in Jesus but that we would live with him. To say faith is important to us isn't just about the words. What we are saying describes the way faith is the foundation upon which our lives are built, and that rock, that strength, the reality supporting everything is love. When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment is he said, love the Lord your God and love one another in the way God loves us. (Mark 12: 30-31) There is nothing more important than this. Love is at the top of the priority list. Love is the main thing and it can be argued that the Apostle Paul understood it to be the only thing.

The beautiful words we've heard from chapter 13 in the book of 1st Corinthians are often read at weddings. There is good reason for this. We refer to this section of the bible as the Love Chapter, and the message is perfect for the occasion when a couple affirms a lifelong commitment to each other. But, Paul didn't write to a couple on their wedding day. Paul was writing to a community. He was writing to the church, and it was a church pulled apart by conflicting loyalties and deep division. Because of this struggle we might assume the Corinthian church was a real mess but, in fact, they were a blessed group. They were talented. They were educated. They were passionate. They possessed natural leadership ability and they knew how to take care of business. The Corinthian church was a collection of strong and capable people. It's just that they had let go of the main thing. Their attention got pulled away from what Christ had placed in their hearts. They were drawn into an obsession with who was right and who was wrong. They were distracted by all of their differences, so much so they didn't even see what God gave them to hold in common. They'd lost the love. Paul writes to bring them back to the main thing. He taught that without love everything else is rendered meaningless. Oh, you can have all kinds of brain power, Paul taught. You can have a striking ability to think and persuade and debate, but this is nothing, wrote the apostle, without love. Paul isn't afraid for us to be confident in our abilities. He understood that it is fine to recognize our strengths. There is nothing wrong with knowing who we are and putting forward our personal perspective or stating our position on whatever the issue is. But if we do it without love it's just noise and thin air. Like the Corinthian church, we are not all alike and in some respects we are dramatically different. But, none of that is the main thing. It's love and love makes every other aspect of our lives come alive with meaning and purpose. This is why Paul says that without love we are nothing. Now, this is not the end of the message. We're not supposed to throw up our hands and say, "Well, I guess I'm just destined to be nothing." This isn't about what we are not. Yes, we are empty and filled with nothingness without love but the good news is we have it. We have love. We are loved. We are gifted with love, and Paul wants us to keep the main thing the main thing. When we stay in sync with God and live in God's love than we maintain a faithful and Christ-centered life. With this as our focus the blessings will flow.

So, what is our take-away this morning. This is it. What we take with us today is the intent to make decisions because of what God has decided. God chooses love. In Christ, God decides to love the world. This means that we, now, can decide to do the same because of God's decision to love. Before we respond, or assume, or judge, or act, or speak let's be mindful this week to filter all of that through the main thing - love. Does that thought or action or word on my part further the reach of love or does it get in the way? Is what I choose to do or what I decided not to do representing love or does it deny love, or even cancel love in my world? Keeping the main thing the main thing requires spiritual diligence and focus. God help us today and every day to choose the way that positions us to be partners of love with Christ in the world.