

II Corinthians 13:11-13 (or 14)
June 19, '11

“GRACE, LOVE & FELLOWSHIP”

I'M NOT ACCUSTOMED TO READING THE ENTIRE BOOK FROM WHICH OUR SCRIPTURE PASSAGE FOR A PARTICULAR SUNDAY IS TAKEN.

I FIND THAT IT'S USUALLY HELPFUL TO READ A FEW OF THE SURROUNDING VERSES, BUT ISN'T NECESSARY TO READ THE ENTIRE BOOK.

THAT WASN'T THE CASE THIS WEEK.

THIS PASSAGE WE'VE READ THIS MORNING IS THE FINAL THREE VERSES OF THE FINAL CHAPTER OF PAUL'S SECOND & FINAL LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN CORINTH.

THIS IS IT!

THESE ARE THE FINAL WORDS HE WRITES TO THIS GROUP OF CHRISTIANS.

WHEN YOU SEE A PASSAGE THAT SAYS “CORINTHIANS 13” YOU MIGHT AUTOMATICALLY THINK “THE LOVE CHAPTER.”

YOU KNOW HOW IT GOES (AND IF YOU DON'T, MANY OF OUR YOUNG PEOPLE CAN HELP YOU OUT BECAUSE IT'S PART OF OUR CHILDREN'S BIBLE MEMORY CONTEST): “*IF I SPEAK IN THE TONGUES OF MEN AND ANGELS, BUT HAVE NOT LOVE....LOVE IS PATIENT & KIND, IT IS NOT JEALOUS OR BOASTFUL....LOVE BEARS ALL THINGS, BELIEVES ALL THINGS, HOPES ALL THINGS, ENDURES ALL THINGS...LOVE NEVER ENDS.*”

THAT'S WHAT WE THINK OF WHEN WE THINK OF CORINTHIANS 13, ISN'T IT?

WELL, THAT'S *FIRST* CORINTHIANS 13.

WHAT WE'VE READ THIS MORNING IS *SECOND* CORINTHIANS 13.

LET'S FACE IT – THERE'S NOT A LOT ABOUT SECOND CORINTHIANS THAT'S VERY MEMORABLE.

WHEN YOU ASK SOMEONE FOR THEIR FAVORITE PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE, I THINK IT'S PRETTY RARE THAT SOMEONE WOULD SUGGEST A PASSAGE FROM II CORINTHIANS.

IT SEEMS TO BE A FAIRLY FORGETTABLE BOOK OF THE BIBLE.

IT'S LIKE A MOVIE SEQUEL THAT DOESN'T QUITE MEASURE UP TO THE ORIGINAL.

INTERESTINGLY, THOUGH, II CORINTHIANS IS A VERY UNIQUE LETTER THAT PAUL WROTE.

IT IS, BY FAR, THE MOST PERSONAL OF ALL HIS LETTERS.

IF WE WERE TO SUGGEST AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LETTER OF PAUL – ONE THAT TOLD MORE ABOUT HIS OWN INNER THOUGHTS & EXPERIENCES THAN ANY OTHER – THIS WOULD BE IT.

I FOUND THIS WEEK THAT IF I WAS GOING TO BE FOCUSING ON THE FINAL 3 VERSES OF THIS VERY PERSONAL & TROUBLING LETTER, I HAD TO READ THE WHOLE THING TO REALLY GET THE IMPACT OF WHAT HE WAS SAYING IN THESE CLOSING WORDS.

THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE LETTER, PAUL HAS BEEN ADDRESSING CONTENTIOUS ISSUES – ISSUES THAT DIVIDED THE CHURCH & ISSUES THAT PUT HIM AT ODDS WITH SOME OF THEIR LEADERS.

THERE WERE THOSE WHO TRIED – IN EVERY CONCEIVABLE WAY – TO DISCREDIT HIM & HIS MINISTRY.

IN THE FINAL THREE, TORTUROUS CHAPTERS OF THE LETTER, PAUL REASSERTS HIS AUTHORITY WITH THE CORINTHIANS & SPEAKS VERY FRANKLY AND, SOMETIMES, VERY HARSHLY.

IT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN AN EASY LETTER TO WRITE!

BUT HOW DO YOU CLOSE A LETTER SUCH AS THIS?

HOW DO YOU END ON A POSITIVE NOTE & DO YOU EVEN ATTEMPT TO DO SO?

WHAT PAUL ENDS UP GIVING US IN THESE CLOSING WORDS IS THE ONE OF THE MOST FREQUENTLY UTTERED PRAYERS & BENEDICTIONS IN THE CHURCH AS WELL AS ONE OF THE FIRST SUGGESTIONS OF THE TRIUNE NATURE OF GOD.

“THE GRACE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, THE LOVE OF GOD & THE COMMUNION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT BE WITH ALL OF YOU.”

I THINK IT’S CLEAR THAT THIS IS THE REASON THIS PASSAGE WAS CHOSEN AS A LECTIONARY READING FOR TODAY – THIS BEING TRINITY SUNDAY.

I DON’T THINK PAUL WAS TRYING TO SET FORTH A DOCTRINE HERE, THOUGH.

HE WAS SIMPLY SPEAKING OUT OF HIS EXPERIENCE & TRYING TO CLOSE WITH WORDS THAT WOULD BE MEANINGFUL TO A PEOPLE IN THE MIDST OF CONFLICT.

HE WAS CALLING THEM TO “GRACE, LOVE & FELLOWSHIP.”

HE WAS CALLING THEM TO REASSESS THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH ONE ANOTHER – TO RECOGNIZE HOW VITAL THOSE RELATIONSHIPS ARE TO A MEANINGFUL LIFE.

I THINK THE IDEA OF RELATIONSHIPS IS ONE THAT WORKS WELL FOR BOTH TRINITY SUNDAY & FATHER’S DAY.

IN FACT, THE IDEA OF RELATIONSHIPS CAN WORK WELL ON ANY GIVEN SUNDAY AND, FOR THAT MATTER, ANY DAY OF THE WEEK, ANY DAY OF THE YEAR, ANY DAY OF LIFE.

FOR, WHEN IT COMES RIGHT DOWN TO IT, WHAT IS LIFE BEYOND RELATIONSHIPS?

ISN’T THAT WHAT MAKES LIFE MEANINGFUL?

FORGET ALL THE TALK ABOUT SOLITUDE & BEING WITH NATURE.

CERTAINLY THEY HAVE THEIR PLACE.

BUT LIFE IS REALLY ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE WHAT GIVE MEANING TO OUR DAY TO DAY EXISTENCE.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE WHAT KEEP US GOING.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE ESSENTIAL TO OUR VERY SURVIVAL!

PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER & AUTHOR FREDERICK BUECHNER PUT IT THIS WAY: *“YOU CAN KISS YOUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS GOOD-BYE AND PUT MILES BETWEEN YOU, BUT AT THE SAME TIME YOU CARRY THEM WITH YOU IN YOUR HEART, YOUR MIND, YOUR STOMACH, BECAUSE YOU DO NOT JUST LIVE IN A WORLD BUT A WORLD LIVES IN YOU.”*

THAT’S WHY I BELIEVE THIS PASSAGE IS SO APPROPRIATE FOR BOTH TRINITY SUNDAY & FATHER’S DAY.

AMONG ALL THE COMPLEXITIES & DEEP MYSTERIES WITHIN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE TRINITY, IS THE INEXPLICABLE TRUTH THAT GOD THE FATHER, GOD THE SON & GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT MODEL THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS.

THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH ONE ANOTHER & THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH US IS A HEAVENLY EMBODIMENT OF WHAT THEY CALL FORTH FROM YOU & ME IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH ONE ANOTHER – GRACE, LOVE & FELLOWSHIP.

AND WHAT IS FATHER’S DAY BUT A CELEBRATION OF RELATIONSHIPS.

IT’S A CELEBRATION OF THE RELATIONSHIPS THAT CHILDREN TREASURE WITH THEIR FATHERS.

IT IS ALSO A CHALLENGE TO US AS FATHERS TO SERVE AS A ROLE MODEL FOR OUR CHILDREN IN ALL OF OUR RELATIONSHIPS - WITH OUR WIVES, OUR OWN PARENTS, OUR SIBLINGS, OUR CO-WORKERS, OUR NEIGHBORS, THE MEMBERS OF OUR CHURCH FAMILY.

AS SIMPLE A CREATURE AS PIGLET UNDERSTOOD THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS WHEN HE SIDLED UP TO POOH ONE DAY.

HE WHISPERED, *“POOH?”*

“YES, PIGLET?”

“NOTHING,” SAID PIGLET, TAKING POOH’S PAW.

“I JUST WANTED TO BE SURE OF YOU.”

RELATIONSHIPS ARE SO VITAL TO LIFE.

THE FIRST TIME I SERVED A CHURCH AS PASTOR WAS THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF SCOTTSBURG.

SCOTTSBURG IS A COMMUNITY OF FEWER THAN 5,000 AND THE CHURCH NUMBERED JUST OVER A HUNDRED.

I REMEMBER CALLING AN ELDERLY WOMAN IN THE CONGREGATION & ASKING IF I COULD STOP BY HER HOUSE FOR A VISIT.

SHE HAD NO FAMILY IN TOWN & I HAD HEARD FROM OTHERS THAT SHE LED A RATHER LONELY LIFE.

SHE SAID THAT WOULD BE FINE, BUT IT WOULD HAVE TO BE IN THE MORNING BECAUSE SHE WAS PRETTY BUSY IN THE AFTERNOON.

WELL, THAT DIDN’T SOUND LIKE A WOMAN WHO LED A LONELY LIFE BUT I DIDN’T PRESS HER ON IT & WE SET UP A TIME & DAY FOR MY VISIT.

WHEN I GOT THERE, SHE WELCOMED ME IN BUT WAS CLEARLY TROUBLED.

AFTER A FEW INITIAL PLEASANTRIES, SHE STARTED TO TALK ABOUT WHAT HAD HER SO UNNERVED.

SHE WAS WORRIED ABOUT A NUMBER OF PEOPLE & AS SHE TOLD ME THEIR STORIES, IT WAS EVIDENT SHE HAD GOOD CAUSE TO WORRY.

THE PEOPLE ABOUT WHOM SHE WAS SO CONCERNED WERE ALL IN TROUBLE.

THEY WERE IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS, IN TROUBLE WITH THE LAW & NOBODY SEEMED TO BE ABLE TO GET ALONG WITH ANYONE.

ON & ON SHE WENT ABOUT THESE PEOPLE & I WAS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT IF THEY WERE FAMILY MEMBERS OR NEIGHBORS OR HOW ON EARTH THIS KINDLY OLD WOMAN NEARLY 90 YEARS OLD HAD EVEN BECOME ASSOCIATED WITH THEM.

I TOLD HER I HOPED THINGS WOULD WORK OUT FOR ALL OF THEM & SHE SAID SHE'D FIND OUT MORE THAT AFTERNOON.

WHEN I ASKED HOW SHE'D KNOW MORE THAT VERY DAY, IT ALL BECAME CLEAR.

SHE SAID, "ALL MY CHILDREN" COMES ON AT 1 & "ONE LIFE TO LIVE" IS AFTER THAT.

THE PEOPLE ABOUT WHOM SHE WAS SO CONCERNED WERE SOAP OPERA CHARACTERS!

THAT'S WHY SHE WAS TOO BUSY TO HAVE ME VISIT IN THE AFTERNOON!

RELATIONSHIPS ARE SO VITAL TO OUR SURVIVAL THAT IF WE DON'T HAVE THEM, WE'LL INVENT THEM.

WITH THE APOSTLE PAUL, HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHRISTIANS IN CORINTH HAD BEEN A TUMULTUOUS ONE.

YET, TO HIM, THEY WERE FAMILY.

DO YOU REMEMBER OUR SCRIPTURE READING *LAST SUNDAY*?

IT WAS TAKEN FROM THE OTHER LETTER OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS.

IT WAS THERE THAT HE INTRODUCED US TO THE IDEA OF THE CHURCH BEING THE BODY OF CHRIST.

WE ARE MEMBERS OF THAT BODY – WE ARE ALL BROTHERS & SISTERS IN CHRIST – WE ARE ALL PART OF THE SAME FAMILY.

THROUGHOUT THIS ENTIRE SECOND LETTER OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH, HE EMPHASIZES THE IMPORTANCE OF THAT RELATIONSHIP WE SHARE WITH ONE ANOTHER.

FAMILY IS FAMILY & NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS, YOU DON'T WALK AWAY FROM FAMILY.

DIFFERENCES CAN BE PUT ASIDE BECAUSE THERE'S SOMETHING FAR MORE IMPORTANT THAT WE SHARE WITH ONE ANOTHER AS PART OF THE FAMILY OF JESUS CHRIST.

DID YOU HAPPEN TO SEE THE STORY ON NBC NIGHTLY NEWS THIS PAST WEEK ABOUT COLONEL JACK JACOBS?

ON MARCH 19, 1968, JACOBS WAS SERVING IN VIET NAM WHEN HIS BATTALION WAS AMBUSHED BY MORE THAN 250 VIET CONG.

JACOBS WAS SHOT IN THE HEAD BUT SAVED 14 OF HIS COMRADES IN A HEROIC EFFORT THAT EARNED HIM A MEDAL OF HONOR FOR HIS CONSPICUOUS GALLANTRY.

HE RECENTLY WENT BACK TO THE SPOT OF THAT AMBUSH & WHILE HE WAS THERE – FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME - HE MET THE VIET CONG COMMANDER OF THAT AMBUSH.

WHEN THEY WERE INTRODUCED TO ONE ANOTHER, THEY EMBRACED.

AND THEN THEY SAT DOWN, PUT THEIR HANDS TOGETHER, ONE IN THE OTHER'S & THEY TALKED.

AS THEIR MEETING ENDED, THESE TWO MEN WHO HAD BEEN MORTAL ENEMIES, SMILED AT ONE ANOTHER & WARMLY EMBRACED AGAIN – THE FEAR & ANIMOSITY DISSOLVED IN A RELATIONSHIP UNFATHOMABLE 40 YEARS BEFORE.

COMPARE THAT TO ANY OF THE FRACTURED RELATIONSHIPS IN YOUR OWN LIFE – ANY OF THE PETTINESS THAT YOU’VE ALLOWED TO DRIVE A WEDGE BETWEEN YOU & A FRIEND OR – WORSE YET – FAMILY MEMBER.

IN THESE WORDS, PAUL NOT ONLY ENCOURAGES – HE EMBODIES – GRACE, LOVE & FELLOWSHIP IN EVERY RELATIONSHIP OF LIFE. AMEN.

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