

December 24, 2017
I Corinthians 13:4-4
John 3:16-17
John 1:1-5; 14



A couple of weeks ago I walked onto an elevator at a hospital in Louisville. This hospital has about the slowest elevators in the entire city and I was on the 9th floor. The elevator filled quickly with people going down to the first floor, a trip that would not be quick. Two of the riders on the elevator were a man and woman, who were together; she a patient at the hospital, wearing her gown and attached to an IV tree, and he was holding on to her, helping to support her. When the door closed he started talking to the rest of us, saying, *I hope you all are having a very blessed day.* We all muttered a muted response. You know how it is on elevators. It's as though there is an unwritten rule that everyone either is to look straight at the door or at the floor and not say anything, so there was a feeling of awkwardness as the man continued talking to us. I don't have any idea what her condition was, at least not in terms of the seriousness, but she did not look as though she felt well at all. And perhaps that's why the man was saying the things that he said. He continued to speak, and as he spoke he got a little more emotional and direct. He said *I want you to know that I love each and every one of you.* To be honest, when a stranger in a hospital looks at me and says *I love you*, I get a little bit uncomfortable, but maybe it's just me.

Now, let me ask you a question – how many of you have had a complete stranger in an elevator tell you they loved you? In all my years of interesting experiences, that was a first for me. And I'm fairly certain it was for everyone else on that elevator as well, because it was as though no one knew what to say in response. I had a lot of questions running through my mind, such as *can you love a complete stranger? What motivated him to say those words to an elevator full of strangers?* And, most puzzling to me, *why was it so hard for me to respond?*

It is probably obvious to anyone who knows me very much at all that I am someone who holds their emotions close to my chest. I am a person who is not demonstrative of my feelings, and many of you joke with me about my aversion to hugs. I stand up here week after week, month after month, and year after year speaking about the need to love one another, so why was it, when someone told a group of people that he loved us, that none of us – including me – seemed to know what to do?

This morning we conclude our Advent series of messages titled *What the World Needs Now*, with a message on *Love*. Of all the needs in our world, is there any that is as great as love? If there is, it's hard for me to imagine what it would be.

I am combining several passages for this morning's Scripture texts. The first two are not Christmas passages, per se, and the third one is a generally overlooked Christmas passage. Each passage is about love, and technically speaking, any passage about love is a Christmas passage, because love is the heart of Christmas. These passages are some of the most recognized and beautiful words ever penned about

love. They are also, we should admit, some of the most difficult. I have not included the entirety of I Corinthians 13, but am using the heart of the passage, where Paul very powerfully writes of the definition of love.

I Corinthians 13:4-8 –

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered it keeps no record of wrongs.

6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 Love never fails.

John 3:16-17

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

John 1:1-5; 14 –

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2 He was with God in the beginning.

3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

It is difficult to express how much those words have sustained me over the years, as I know they have sustained you, and millions of others as well.

1. I Corinthians 13:4-8.

I have read I Corinthians 13 at a lot of weddings over the course of my ministry. It is a beautiful passage, isn't it? They are some of the most beautiful, poetic words imaginable. But they also scare the daylight out of me. Sometimes, at weddings, I half-expect at least one of the couple to stop me when I'm reading the passage to say, *wait a minute – come again? Are you kidding me? I'm not sure this is what I was signing up for!*

I know that my feeble efforts at love fall so very short of what Paul writes, but I try as much as my sometimes faint heart will allow me to live up to that challenge. But still, I've not always lived up to love. Sometimes, to be honest, I've not even tried very hard. But I'm probably not the only one. Sometimes it's hard to love people. Sometimes it's hard to love me. Sometimes it's hard to love a stranger on an elevator, but love is what the world so needs, and so does each of us.

Paul says that *love never fails*. I believe that. I have witnessed a lot of heartbreak because of people failing love. I don't think there is a person here who hasn't felt the heartbreak of someone failing love. And one of the great tragedies that occurs when people fail love is the scars that are created – scars that cause people to pull back from one another and create a failure to trust and create an atmosphere of hurt and bitterness.

We may fail love, but love itself never fails. Love calls us ever higher. Love calls us to live with grace rather than judgment, love calls us to forgiveness rather than bitterness, it calls us to move beyond hatred, it calls us to go places we would not ordinarily go, it calls us to people we would normally shun,

and it asks of us what we sometimes feel we cannot do; but love will still ask of us all those things and more.

2. *John 3:16-17.*

Who hasn't been moved innumerable times at the words of John 3:16-17? Those verses are probably the first words of Scripture most of us learned. I don't know when I first memorized them; perhaps long ago in Vacation Bible School or Sunday School, but I can scarcely remember a time when I didn't have them committed to memory. If only they could be as committed to our hearts as well!

We don't always quote verse 17, but they should always be tied together, because Jesus rejects judgment in favor of love. There are a couple of reasons why I am not interested in judging people or preaching condemning sermons. One is because I used to be much more condemning of people. Under pressure of the *crowd mentality* I sometimes joined in the chorus of condemnation or ridicule of individuals or groups. I wish I had stood up for people instead of joining in with the crowd, but there were times when I gave into the mentality of the crowd.

Another reason why I am not interested in condemning people is because I do not want to lend my voice to the creation of an atmosphere that leads to the oppression, ridicule, or rejection of other people. I don't want to add my voice to the harsh chorus of condemnation that is far too prevalent in many corners of the religious community. Too many people want to judge and condemn others while ignoring the parts of their own lives that would be worthy of condemnation by their own standard.

And third, it communicates the idea that we must somehow earn or deserve God's love, which is not at all true. We do not have to do anything to earn God's love or to deserve God's love. The very fact that we exist is all the reason God needs to love us, and anyone who communicates, in any way, that we must earn or deserve God's love is teaching a falsehood!

3. *John 1:1-5; 14.*

The words of John's gospel, in what might be the most overlooked of Christmas passages, where he tells us that *the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*. I am always hesitant to say anything about Greek in a message because it sounds pretentious. Every seminarian, after only one Greek class, suddenly fancies himself an expert in Greek, and I am very far from an expert. What I did learn in Greek class many years ago, however, is that verse 14 could be translated *the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us*. I love that way of translating the verse! Imagine, the God and creator of this vast, unending universe became one of us, lived among us, walked the dusty roads, drank water to quench his thirst, ate the fruits of his own earth to still his hunger, and, in the greatest act of mercy and grace, gave his life for us!

At this time of year I enjoy the beauty of the church, with all the lights and decorations. Sometimes, at the conclusion of a service, when everyone is gone, I like to sit for a few quiet moments here in the sanctuary, with the lights setting a mood for reflection and meditation. Tonight, after the Christmas Eve service, I will take a few minutes and sit and enjoy the peace and quiet of the moment before going home. It is a wonderful moment, after the beauty of that service, to enjoy those moments, soaking up the surroundings and thinking of the love of God.

It is the love of God that is the foundation of Christmas, and the foundation of all things. The lights that illuminate the trees and decorations in our church bear testimony to Jesus as the Light of the World, the Light that, according to John, came into this world and pitched his tent among us, to live with us, and to redeem us.

On this Christmas Eve, allow Jesus, the Light of the world, to keep you now and forever in his love!