

Wesley United Methodist Church

February 3, 2019

“Old Favorite.”

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Most of us play favorites, whether we admit it or not. All parents try to love their children with equal devotion. That’s hard to do. My own parents had a favorite: it was my brother, I’m convinced. Yet from his perspective, it was our youngest sister. Favoritism seems to be a part of our biblical perspective. Abraham and Sarah favored Isaac over Ishmael. Then old Isaac favored Esau the country boy, but his wife Rebekah favored pompous little Jacob. There’s no doubt old Jacob himself later favored and spoiled little Joseph. Most of us would say that the true course of action for a parent would be love and favor the child that needs it most at the time.

Even preachers play favorites when it comes to certain Scriptures for sermons. Fortunately, some preachers use the lectionary and move through the whole Bible. One preacher always listed a different sermon topic, but every Sunday you knew he was going to preach on John 3:16 and money and use the feeding of the 5000 by Jesus with a few loaves of bread and some fish as an illustration. The congregation contended that he had but one sermon, on tithing, which he could preach 52 different ways in a year’s time.

Sometimes we hear messages that are so familiar they cease to have an impact on us. Just as a child gets spoiled from too much attention, too much favoritism, so do some of our Scriptures get spoiled. They are so familiar they get taken for granted and rush past us. We repeat the Lord’s Prayer or the Ten Commandments with hardly a second thought. At funerals the preacher reads the Twenty-Third Psalm, and the mind seems to click to automatic pilot well before the preacher gets to the part about “walking through the valley of the shadow of death.”

Today’s Scripture is an old favorite. It’s an old favorite that for many of us has become spoiled. Since childhood, most of us have heard the words of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians on love. When a man went to talk to his future father-in-law about marrying his daughter, he was a little nervous, to say the least. He just wanted to get his quick permission and get out of there as quickly as possible. After all, no father thinks any boy is good enough to marry his daughter. And nothing is ever as simple as it first seems. So, the young man had to sit there and listen to the old lawyer’s philosophy of life. Finally, the elder gentleman concluded, “And be sure to read together 1 Corinthians 13 at least once a week.”

1 Corinthians 13. That’s like reading yesterday’s newspaper for most of us. Old news. But it’s a mistake not to re-examine, occasionally, the significance of this old favorite. Most of us are familiar with the tragedy that grows and festers from lack of love. The examples are everywhere. So many people could have been different if they had but known love.

The scenarios saturate even our American history. He began his life without love. His mother was a powerfully built dominating woman who found it difficult to love anyone. The mother gave her child no affection, no love, and no training during those early years. He was absolutely rejected from earliest childhood. Despite a high IQ, he was ugly and poor and unlovable. When he was thirteen years old, the school psychologist commented that he probably didn’t even know the meaning of the word “love.” His mother even forbade him to call her at work.

He finally dropped out of high school in his third year. He thought he might find acceptance in the Marine Corps. But his lack of love went with him. He was thrown out and laughed at, with an undesirable discharge. A young, scrawny man in his twenties with no sense of worthiness, he went to live in a foreign country. But he found no love there either. He married a girl, who has herself been an illegitimate child, and brought her back to America. She developed the same contempt for him that everyone else had displayed. She demanded more than he could provide and became his most vicious opponent. Finally, she forced him to leave.

He tried to make it on his own, but he was terribly lonely. He went home and begged her to take him back. He crawled. He came back on her terms: she could take his meager salary and spend it any way she wished. She belittled his feeble attempts to support the family in front of her friends. That night, he began to weep bitterly in the darkness of his love-deprived nightmare. He was completely and consistently without

knowledge of love. But the next day he was a different person. He went to the garage and took down his rifle. He carried it with him to his newly acquired job in a book storage building. And from the third floor of that building he sent two shells crashing into the head of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Stories such as this rivet our attention. Love is important. Lack of love is tragedy. So, we try to express love to people who are deprived of the most essential things in life—food, clothing, shelter, and affection. We try to love the unlovable, those who lack financial security, and the sick who are deprived of health. Love is a solution to many people's problems.

But this is not the only kind of love 1 Corinthians 13 is talking about.

Old Favorite is not just talking about social improvement. Old Favorite has something to say to people like us.

Ancient Corinth was a money town. But the people there really did not manufacture a great deal of goods. They were mostly collectors of money from goods others made. They were realtors, bankers, lawyers, professionals, and salesmen. They engaged primarily in trade and commerce. They were unlike the manual laborers, carpenters, farmers, builders, and fishermen that Jesus addressed in places like Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Galilee. The Corinthians were owners of ships like the fishermen Jesus addressed worked on. They handled the money from shops and furniture industries like Jesus and his father works in as carpenters. The Corinthians were the first century's accountants, vice presidents of sales, CEO's and professors. They were also terribly good people, quite appallingly good. They were not a bad lot at all, only a few of them. True, they did have a mountain towering above their town, topped as it was with the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. It was populated with a thousand temple prostitutes. But Corinth was the most important seaport of its day. That stuff was mostly for the out-of-towners who came during the trade seasons, kind of like the tourists who visit the red-light districts in a major American city when they are far from home. The Corinthians were affluent, church-going, and intelligent.

They were new to Christianity, but they were extremely wise in the ways of trade and commerce. They were like us. Like the ancient Corinthians, we do interesting work, we are paid well, and engage in work that does not break the body.

It's a nice theological meaning for us to wrestle with the parables of Jesus depicting the farmer sowing seed, the builder building on sand, and the innkeeper opening up a room for the Samaritan to house the beaten traveler. But honestly, you and I are closer in attitude and environment to the ancient Corinthians than the Galilean farmers, carpenters, and innkeepers. Well, some of us are farmers and many of us work with their hands. Paul's letter to them and to us says that we are not to forget the important stuff in life. Love.

Psychologist Harry Stack Sullivan maintains that "love begins when a person feels another person's need to be as important as his own." Frankly, life itself begins when a person feels another person's need is as important as his own. From the beginning of the Bible, the emphasis is on community. Adam is not complete without someone to love. The Lord God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make another who completes him." We alone are nothing; we do not even exist as a human apart from someone to love. The helping of another person is what makes us human. Paul hammered home the point to the Corinthians: "Without love, I am nothing. Without charity I am nothing at all." Without love, regardless of my money, regardless of my power, regardless of my education, I am meaningless. Life has no meaning for me. I am dissatisfied, lonely, unfulfilled, and miserable.

Paul was on target in bringing up the subject of love with the Corinthians.

They did not need a parable on evil or racism or knowledge. He was dealing with the age-old problem of the well-to-do: love and charity tends to go out the window when filled with affluence. That's always been a strange fact of life.

So, Paul wrote the Old Favorite, yesterday's news. "Now faith, hope, and love remain—these three things—and the greatest of these is love. Amen.