

“Make A Valentine”

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BASED ON THE THEME, “A STRANGE PATH TO GLORY”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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1 Corinthians 13 [NRSV]

¹If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

In a culture that worships wealth, glory, and power the church proclaims a Savior that was poor, condemned, and vulnerable. What might be even more strange is that we try to convince other people that this is a path they should follow as well. Next week we begin the season of Lent. Throughout that season I want to share with you some thoughts on this strange path to glory. I call it a strange path to glory because the Christian way invites us to find the glory of Easter through the suffering of the cross. By all normal logic, it is a very strange path indeed.

I want to begin this strange path to glory on this Valentine’s Day by inviting

us all to consider how strange our concepts of love are. Whether you look at human concepts of love or divine concepts of love you could categorize either as strange for different reasons. I want to explain what I think the difference is between God’s love and human love as Paul puts them before us in this morning’s Scripture lesson.

I have given you a kind of checklist in your bulletin for you to use in your own relationships with others and with God and I will refer to that as I try to lift up the differences between the kind of love Paul describes and the way love is portrayed or practiced in much of our culture today. I invite you to reflect on

how well you are doing in each of these areas and then prioritize the areas you need to work on. My assumption is that you might not have this love thing down completely and perfectly yet. Forgive me if I am wrong and please let me know if you do have it down perfectly because I would like to meet the person who has perfected the art and science of love.

First, let me take a few moments to give you some background on this passage. This passage is almost too familiar if you are a Christian of some years. But many people don't understand its deeper meanings – and it really opens itself up to several. Paul is trying to get the Christians in Corinth to stop playing the “My dog's better than your dog” game. They were arguing over who had the better spiritual powers. Paul points out that it doesn't matter what spiritual power you have if you are not loving in your actions and attitudes towards others. He says, “if I have powers, and knowledge, and even faith but don't have love I have nothing, I gain nothing, I am nothing.” So Paul is pretty clear that as Christians, love is our highest ideal. This is not as much of an issue for our kind of church where we don't, for example, make speaking in tongues a proof of faith. But we still need to test the quality of our love.

The second point that Paul is making is theological. Yes, Paul wants the Corinthians to practice this kind of love, but he is also describing how God loves us. This is where we begin to see the difference between most human ideas about love and the ideal of God's love. The culmination of this is when Paul

says, “Love never ends.” Now I am going to say more about this later, but let me just point out here that this is not true of humans. Love ends. Sometimes it ends in divorce or in broken hearts or such. Sometimes it ends at death, although the widow or widower left behind may still love, the love from the deceased is no longer experienced by the survivor, except in memory. But Paul's point is God's love never ends. God never ceases loving us. Let me come back to this later and tie it in with your checklist.

I think the third point ties in as well. Paul is essentially telling them to “grow up.” It is time to stop the childish nonsense of comparing their faith with one another to determine who is better. “When I grew up it was time to put away childish things.” Yet many Christians “insist on their own way.” They do this in relation to other Christians and even in their private lives. And so do many of us in our personal relationships. On this Valentine's Day it is time to ask ourselves if we are practicing a “grown up” love or if we are still stuck in “childish ways.” So let's turn to that check list I gave you and see how we rate both in our personal relationships and our God-relationships.

Today I want you to make a Valentine. But I am not talking about a paper heart Valentine. We don't have construction paper, there are no Hallmark shops here, and I don't know how to work those online card sites. Instead of spending money on cards and candy-filled hearts or other gifts, let's start making over our lives into a “Valentine”

of love, and let's make it one that is more mature, more complete, and more Christian in its essence. Paul gives us a pattern, an outline. We don't have to be good with scissors or markers and crayons. Let's begin work on our lives to make a Valentine for the person we love, the people we should love, and for God.

I have regrouped some of Paul's list into what I would call common groups. First, I have grouped together "love is patient, it is not irritable, or resentful." Isn't it ironic that we often are the most impatient, irritable, and resentment-filled with those we claim we love? We know we can get away with it. Those who love us are willing to put up with it more than others. If I act with a stranger the way I sometimes act with those I love he would probably punch me out. Am I the only one who can make that confession here?

Look at the rest of that statement. Resentment and impatience I think both come from unfulfilled expectations. So let's look at what we are expecting of those we claim we love. Are our expectations fair? Have we expressed them so that the person knows them? Have they agreed that what I expect is reasonable? If the other person doesn't know what I expect, how can I expect them to read my mind? If they haven't acknowledged the expectation as reasonable, how can I expect them to satisfy me?

Most of all, I think we need to consider this. One of the general rules of Christian love, it seems to me, is that it calls us to always puts the other person first. Jesus said, there is "no greater love

... than to lay down your life for your friends." This is certainly true in a literal sense. If we are going to grow in Christian love for others then how much more important is it for us to lay down our lives for someone we love? Wouldn't you think that they would rank even higher on the list of importance than someone who is a friend? So to lay down our lives is to set aside our expectations and think about how we can fulfill their expectations.

This, it seems to me leads directly into the second check point on our Valentine list. I have grouped together "Love is kind; it does not insist on its own way, it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth." I think when we begin to ask how we can be a blessing to another person and make that a higher priority than expecting that other person to bless us then we will find greater happiness in our relationships, we will find that the other person becomes more willing to fulfill our expectations, and we find that it is easier to be honest and respectful towards those we love.

When we look at the example of Jesus we see someone who related to others with grace, respect and honesty. He especially treated the less powerful, the outcast, and the so-called sinner with dignity. His honesty towards the powerful, the religiously superior, and those who would judge others may have sounded harsh at times, but it was never meant simply to condemn, but to move them toward a different attitude and behavior. I know I need to work on always treating those I love with respect, grace, and honesty as a sign of love.

The third point I have invited us to check on is that “love is not envious, boastful, or arrogant, or rude.” In essence this is very similar to the other points. All of us probably can confess to times we have let envy or pride cause us to act in unloving ways. I can remember a moment of clarity as a teenager that I was treating my mother with a surly and unkind attitude that was unjustified. I repented of it and began to work to be more pleasant and to stop abusing her with my attitude. This came to mind recently when I was reading one of the daily devotions from the UCC’s email source.

Nicole Lamarche wrote about returning home after her first year away at college. She had a lot of things she wanted to do, but she said there was one thing that came first. She wanted to spend time with her mom. Her mom was the one that got her up at 5:30 in the morning to study, stayed up late to give her a meal, and helped her as she wrestled with the possibilities in her life. She said, “I wanted to thank her for loving me like that; I wanted to tell her that I couldn’t have gotten this far without her. She didn’t need it particularly; she would have kept on walking with me and delighting in me. But something happens when love spills over from one to another. Love like this overflows, because it is so good that it can’t help but touch the world around it. And I wonder if this is true for our God as well. When we pour out our praise and love spills out into God, I wonder if God’s very being is added to in some way.” In any case we can be sure when we pour love back into those who love us

it increases our joy, their joy, and I believe it increases God’s joy.

I have already commented on the endurance of God’s love. The last two pick up on this. My main point here is that the Scriptures teach us that God’s love always wins. Separation, sin, even death cannot overcome God’s love. That is the witness of the cross to us today. It is empty because God’s love wins. Yes, there are many times my love fails. There are many times my love reaches its limits. But God’s love does not. Faith is the promise and the practice of seeking to rely more and more on the love of God instead of on my own power to love.

I have tried to point out that this involves forgiveness. I have invited us to consider whether we welcome God’s forgiveness for ourselves and whether we are willing to forgive others who may have failed us. One reason to do this is that our refusal to forgive someone who has hurt us will act as a barrier to fully loving anyone else. Every resentment, in any form, will act as a limit on our ability to love freely and fully.

To the world this kind of love sounds strange. It may not sound like a romantic path to glory. So this Valentine’s Day I encourage you to make sure you do the card thing, or the chocolate thing or whatever your beloved most appreciates as a sign of your love. But go a step further. Make a commitment to God to start working at making a Valentine of your life. Paul’s words are a powerful and effective guide for doing that. It may be a strange path, but it is a true path to love and glory. AMEN.