

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, June 5, 2011
Lessons: Psalm 30:4-12 and I Corinthians 15:12-20,30-32,42-44,57-58

THE STRENGTH TO LOVE

It seems the Christians in Corinth believed in the resurrection of Jesus but not in resurrection for anybody else. Paul tells them they cannot have it both ways – Jesus, yes; everyone else, no. I suppose they saw Jesus as a god who came to earth and worked some kind of magic for the benefit of his followers. The Corinthians were enamored of what they called “the gifts of the Spirit” and especially of spiritual experiences of euphoria, of ecstasy. They were religious thrill seekers who wanted for themselves the benefits derived from Christian faith in the here and now. Something inside me cringes when I hear television evangelists promising blessings, bountiful blessings, like carnival barkers luring people into their tents. *Come inside and get your blessings! Come on, folks, step right this way.*

Paul’s response throughout both letters to the Corinthians includes sarcasm that says in effect, *How nice for you! We apostles get beaten and tossed into prison while you get blessings, and then you have the nerve to dismiss us as fools because we are expending our lives for your sake.* The letters to the Corinthians are exercises in the restrained anger of a man still trying to encourage faith, hope, and love.

A cynic might see Paul’s hope for resurrection as a calculating matter of giving up pleasures and comforts in this life to gain the eternal reward, but in what is now chapter 13, the well-know “love chapter,” Paul invalidates any such reward seeking by a Christian. Even martyrdom without love offers no reward. For Paul, resurrection hope is not all about blessings now or happiness in heaven later but, rather, about gaining the strength to love.

Time out. We need clarity about this thing called love. Paul describes famously how love behaves toward other people, as in “love does not insist on its own way” but is patient and kind, never arrogant or rude. But we who hear of love so often in terms of desire and infatuation need more help here. What is this thing Jesus names as the goodness in life and the only perfection God desires from us? If to love God completely and love our neighbor as we love ourselves is to be truly alive and rightly human, what is love and what does strengthening it require of us?

For Jesus and those who follow him, love is first of all our willing positive response to God’s love for us, but our response must include other people because God loves them,

too. So, right off the bat, we can say that love on Jesus' terms excludes any form of religious devotion that does not seek justice, healing, and wholeness for other people and for the human community. Who is this neighbor I am to love? My neighbor is the person with whom Jesus Christ stands before me in need. "As you have done to one of the least of these, my sister or brother," he says, "you have done to me." I try to take care of my own needs and in that way love myself. Now, turn that care outward so I realize my needs are inseparable from the needs of my neighbor and the welfare of the community. Life in Christ is relational, as God created life to be. Because God loves each and all, life is a matter of receiving, giving, and sharing; life is not a matter of taking all we can and using people (or God) for our purposes.

Earlier in this series of sermons on the effects of our resurrection hope, I tried to explain how this hope gives true and lasting meaning to our lives and even to those painful experiences that by themselves would be meaningless. I first emphasized the promise of *true* meaning for our lives – of life made real – but the resurrection makes the true also the *lasting*, so that our lives are given meaning which will survive our setbacks and even our deaths. Paul is not just countering bad doctrine; he's fighting discouragement. Why else would he end his resurrection rant with, "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain"? Why else would he say, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied"? Paul has hitched his wagon to a star, and he would not expend his life and strength if he did not really believe that star was out there for him. "Why," he asks the comfortable Corinthians, "are we putting ourselves in danger every day?" Paul has found something so worth living for that he is willing to die for it and so worth dying for that he is willing to live for it.

The resurrection hope he receives from trusting Jesus Christ gives Paul the strength to love. I'm not talking about sentiments. Paul is anything but sentimental about these religious thrill seekers and blessing sponges who make up the Corinthian church which, not surprisingly has split into competing factions. He's upset, angry, hurt enough to be sarcastic, and bitterly disappointed, but he will not give up on them because Christ has never given up on him.

We live and come together as a church in a time when people all around us are, to varying degrees, giving up on the world, each other, and themselves. Day after day, I hear cynicism about business, public education, politics, economics, social concerns, and our judicial system. People speak cynically of their own faiths and religion in general. Many are discouraged and depressed. They can't move and won't move because their depression saps their energy to strive, hope, or even care. We are in a crisis, and it is not one to be overcome by mere smiles and sloganized optimism that things will get better.

We express our resurrection hope by refusing to give up on the world, the church, each other, or ourselves. By continuing to care in a world turned bitterly cynical, we reaffirm that we will not give up on Jesus Christ who never gave up on us because God will not give up on us. We will not settle for a haven of private contentment, a measure of tranquility in a life of refuge. We may get angry at life and even at God, but we will take that anger to God. Anger still cares. Frustration still cares. Grief cares deeply. Patience and sometimes impatience can both express caring; patience just does it better. The opposite of love is not anger or grief but apathy, and from beginning to end, the Bible assures us that God is never apathetic toward us or this world.

How ironic that God has been portrayed philosophically as the perfection of absolute apathy, as though caring were a weakness, as though empathy and compassion were character flaws. The God of the prophets and Jesus is the very opposite of the so-called Unmoved Mover, the God who creates but does not care and so is not moved by our distresses and sufferings. Jesus Christ is the living, dying, and risen embodiment of God's caring. Has the gospel not made that much clear to us? God will cease caring about us and the created world only when God stops caring about Jesus. That's what his life, death, and resurrection mean. The Corinthians thought they could isolate Christ as other-than-us, a divine exception to the rule of death, a transcendent misfit in our world of live-it-up-now, taking what you can grab, for tomorrow you die. No, Jesus united himself with us so completely that, by God's design, God can't love him without loving us, too. That's the whole idea. As a congregation of Christ's church, we need to catch the spirit of that idea; we need to love this world God loves so much.

From the resurrection hope we have in Christ, we can draw the strength to love the world, to love the church, to love that neighbor with whom Jesus stands before us in distress, and to love ourselves because he stands with us, too, and will never give up on us. Not even death can break the bond of love. I don't know what a "spiritual body" is any more than Paul himself knew, but I do know it means that God's love is the thing that will forever keep giving us life. In eternity, you will be you healed and made whole, and love will recognize its own, and that's all we need to know to go forward with strength to care and to live with hope. What I said earlier Paul found we can find for ourselves also. He found something so worth living for that he was willing to die for it and so worth dying for that he was willing to live for it.

Blessings are a good concept, and certainly for myself I see it as far better to receive the good in life as blessing from God and be thankful than to take it as mere good luck. But what I believe we need first and foremost from the hope God gives us in Christ is the courage to let ourselves be loved and so keep receiving the strength to love. Amen.