

January 16, 2011

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

## Sermons



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### The Prayer

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

1 Corinthians: 13

Is “love” a cheap word? We hear it everywhere – pop music, tennis scores, TV commercials, romantic novels, soap operas, movies. Love: love affair, lovelier, loveless, lovable, Luvs diapers, loveliest, lovelorn, lover, lovely, lovesick. Love - it might be easy to be put off by a word that has become so overused – so diluted.

But, in his first letter to the Christians at Corinth, Paul singles out “love” as the greatest spiritual gift. “Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” Or as *The Message* Bible puts it, “But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us towards that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.” Why does Paul say that love is the best of the three—greater even than faith?

Perhaps what is happening here is what happens to some preachers who tell their congregations every Sunday morning that the topic for the day is the very “center” of the Christian message. A lot of preachers do that. No matter what verse, or word, or text they are preaching on, they find some way to say that it is the most important one in the whole Bible. It is a way to get our attention. You’ve heard those preachers: “Today’s text is the most important text in the whole Bible.” Or, they’ll say: “Grace is the one word which describes Christianity.”

It's the preacher's attempt to collapse the majesty and mystery of Christianity into a bumper sticker slogan, which you can take home with you. Maybe that's it. Maybe Paul did a three-part sermon series: faith, hope, and love and this week's key word is "love." I don't know. Somehow, I think there's more to it than that. I don't think that Paul is just trying to squeeze the gospel into one word.

Perhaps, what Paul is saying is that love is the one gift that all Christians should have. As the campfire song puts it, "They will know we are Christians by our love." Do you think that's it?

I don't know. Certainly, love is a necessary quality for the Christian life; but, there are others too and Paul mentions two of them – faith and hope. How can there be Christianity without faith? And hope - hope is our bridge to the future – hope is what keeps the Christian going.

Perhaps Paul says that love is the greatest gift – the best of the top three – because it is the one gift that endures forever, that is absolutely permanent. Is that the answer? Does love's greatness stem from the fact that when God's kingdom finally comes in fullness, faith and hope will no longer be necessary? Maybe that's it. Faith will be replaced by knowledge and hope will find its realization, but love will not be superseded by anything. It lasts forever. Maybe that's it.

Or, is there another reason? Is love the greatest because it is of the very nature of God, the essence of God? Faith and hope, wonderful gifts though they are, are not exercised by God. Love is the property of God himself. Love is the essential activity, of God himself. God *is* love. When we love (either God or each other) we are doing, however imperfectly, what God does. Perhaps it is in this sense that love is the greatest gift.

In his 56 years on this planet, Adolph Hitler did incredible harm and was responsible for millions of terrible deaths. Yet in all the horror and darkness he unleashed, there were pinpoints of light and nobility - no thanks to Hitler himself. A German soldier, Private Joseph Schultz was one of those pinpoints of light.

Schultz was sent to Yugoslavia shortly after the German invasion. One day, out of the blue, the sergeant called out eight names, his among them. As they hitched up their rifles, they thought they were going on a routine patrol. Soon they came to the top of a hill, still not knowing what their mission was. On the brow of the hill stood eight Yugoslavians, five men and three women. It was then, when they got about 50 feet away from them, when any sharpshooter could shoot out the eye of a quail, that the soldiers realized what their mission was.

The eight soldiers lined up. The sergeant barked out, "Ready!" and they lifted up their rifles. "Aim!" and they got their sights. And suddenly, in the silence that prevailed, a butt of a rifle slapped the ground with a thud. The sergeant, and the seven other soldiers and those eight Yugoslavians stopped and looked. Private Joseph Schultz walked toward the Yugoslavians. His sergeant called out to him and ordered him to come back, but he pretended not to hear.

Instead, he walked the 50 feet to the mound of the hill, and he joined hands with the eight Yugoslavians. There was a moment of silence, and then the sergeant yelled "Fire!" And Private Joseph Schultz died, mingling his blood with those innocent men and women. Found on his body was an excerpt from Paul, "Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always

trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.”

There's a woman in Dallas, Texas by the name of Mrs. Boston; she's been written up in the paper. Since her husband was gone, and her own sons and daughter were out on their own, Mrs. Boston has cared for foster children no one wants, no one else will take. The article I read says she has 13 children staying with her right now and they are all victims: muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, Down syndrome – all victims. She gets the children from the welfare people and she takes them home and pours love over them. She teaches this one, in a wheelchair, to play the piano; gets that one, who can't hear at all, ready to go to a special school each morning, and waits with open arms at the end of the afternoon when he comes home. They said this other child would never be able to read, but they didn't calculate on Mrs. Boston's patient persistence; and that child reads now. When this one child came two years ago, she couldn't dress herself nor do anything; they had to get her out of where she was staying; she was too much trouble. Now she looks after herself in the sunshine of Mrs. Boston's love. Eighty-six unwanted, handicapped children have lived at Mrs. Boston's; 86 motherless children who can never say again that no one loves them.

What gifts has God given you? Can you speak with eloquence? Are you a teacher or a parent, or a gifted businessperson or a homemaker, or a skilled craftsman? Are you a person of means? Do you have faith and hope? If so, remember that great as any of these gifts are, love is greater still.

“So faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” For faith without love is cold, and hope without love is grim. Love is the fire, which kindles faith, and it is the light, which turns hope into certainty.

Let me end today with an interesting poem, which is simply titled *The Prayer*. Funny name for a poem, but that's the title, *The Prayer*. It goes like this...

*I asked God to take away my pride.  
And God said no.  
God said it was not for him to take away,  
But for me to give up.*

*I asked God to make my handicapped child whole,  
And God said no.  
God said her spirit is whole.  
Her body is only temporary.*

*I asked God to grant me patience.  
And God said no.  
God said that patience is a by-product of tribulation.  
It isn't granted. It is earned.*

*I asked God to give me happiness.  
And God said no.  
God said he gives blessings.  
Happiness is up to me.*

*I asked God to spare me pain.  
And God said no.  
God said suffering draws you apart from worldly care  
And brings you closer to him.*

*I asked God to make my spirit grow.  
And God said no.  
God said I must grow my own.  
But I will be in heaven one day because I believe.*

*I asked God to help me love others as much as he loves me.  
God said, "Ah, at last. You finally have the idea."*