

A DARING LOVE

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
October 21, 1984 I Thessalonians 1:3

Someone has said, "The largest room in the world is the room for self-improvement." That applies to churches as well as to individuals.

Last week we were challenged by Emery Barrette to hope. He dared us to hope. Today, we look at A DARING LOVE: next week, A DARING FAITH. Our Scripture lesson today begins several for the next few Sundays from the book of I Thessalonians. Paul, the writer, remembers the Christians at Thessalonica with positive feelings. The Thessalonian Christians had gone out of their way to befriend him. They even helped him escape from the police. When Paul first came to Thessalonica, he was misunderstood by the populace, as is so often the case. The concept of Messiah--Savior--when translated into terminology familiar to Greeks and Romans, sounded like "emperor." So it was common to accuse Paul of being a revolutionary, trying to undermine the authority of the emperor, by proclaiming that Jesus Christ was the only true "emperor." In Thessalonica, a mob gathered and the authorities were called to arrest Paul, but the Thessalonian Christians, at great risk to their own security and future in that city, escorted Paul to safety, and he escaped.

Paul, in later life, remembered the Thessalonian Christians for their "work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." They truly had a daring hope, a daring love, and a daring faith, characteristics of a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ, qualities which we today need in order to survive and succeed in these days.

Today, let us look at A DARING LOVE. A few years ago, I was asked by a neighboring church to visit them during Lent and preach a sermon on the topic, "If I Only Had One Sermon to Preach." That was a challenge. When I was a member of the Board of Ordained Ministry and helped interview candidates for the United Methodist ministry, I would usually ask the candidate to state Christianity in one sentence; capsule the Christian faith in one sentence. What would your sentence be? Or, to put it another way, what is the key verse of the Bible, on which all the others hinge?

My choice--for the major sermon, the capsule of the Christian faith, the key Bible verse--is John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." That is the heart of our faith.

That verse tells us that love is the very essence, the basis, of God's relationship with the world, with humans and with all creation. God loves the world. God loves the wayward humans. God loves those who would destroy the creation. God loves humanity who is in open rebellion against God. God loves you. God loves me. God is not indifferent to your situation. God is not indifferent to your suffering, your problems. God is not just watching, observing, from some far-off place called heaven. God loves.

The manifestation of this love--the expression of this love--in fact, the definition of love--is that God gave. God gave his Son. God gave of self. God came to you and me in the person Jesus, and Jesus gave, gave unstintingly, without reservation, unselfishly. Jesus gave all. Jesus gave his resources, time, mental energy, emotional, spiritual energy. Jesus extended himself and expended himself. Jesus gladly gave the ultimate sacrifice, his own life. In my youth, I was touched by the gospel song we sang, "I gave my life for thee; what hast thou given for me?"

God so loved the world that he gave. To love is to give. To give is to love. We've been challenged this fall to be A-LIVE. To be alive is to love, for Love Is Vital Energy, LIVE. God is alive. God is alive in our church. To live is to give. To give is to live. The mystery of life is revealed. To live is to give.

Perhaps you have noticed that when the designated giving budgets are presented and explained, the Mission Budget for 1985 is first, followed by Ministry and then Maintenance. That order is intentional and in itself is a challenge. Churches often pay lip service to Mission, but the first bills paid are usually utilities and insurance, then salaries, and if any is left over, a nod to God is given through a mission payment.

But we have intentionally listed Mission first, for a church lives as it gives. Our 1985 budget amounts do not yet give Mission its due, but the challenge is there. We still have the debt on this building to retire. We had some hard times, and our finances are not yet where they must be, but we're on the way. Without a structure, a building, there would be no base for mission and ministry. Without ministry--ministry to our congregation, ministry to the community by our congregation, without outreach in love to all persons in this area, without ministry--there would be no base for Mission.

But, the goal is Mission. God calls the church to be Christ's body and Christ gave. God calls us as a church to give, for to love is to give. I hear Lillian Wallace's appeal from India and I want to respond. Lillian was called to be a missionary when she was a member of Modesto First Methodist and, for years has received salary support from Palo Alto First United Methodist. So she is close to us. She is Principal of the Hudson Memorial Girls School. Because of the shortage of trained personnel and money, she is Principal, fund-raiser, building manager, counselor, speaker, etc. For years now she has dreamed of additional classroom space. The need is great. You know of India's poverty and the status of girls in their society. So many girls are attending, they are holding classes on the stage in the auditorium, but she has received very little response from American churches. I hear her cry, and I want to respond.

I hear the cry come from Bakersfield. In response to the huge numbers of people coming to the San Joaquin Valley looking for work that isn't there, Gerry Phelps has helped establish a center. One hundred persons sleep in the center daily; some 2,500 meals are served per week, on a shoestring. These are people who want to help themselves. Gerry says the Center has a policy that everyone must be gone by 5:00 a.m. Rarely, she says, is anyone there after 4:00 a.m. They have gone to the Union Halls to wait for work, to board the trucks to go to the fields, or to continue to drive listlessly because there was not enough work. I hear that cry, and I want to respond.

We are called to give. We have been redeemed in order to give. We have been loved by God in Jesus Christ, and we are called to love. To love is to give, for God so loved the world he gave. A church is alive when it gives. Love is vital energy to be expended. And, ironically, here is the secret, the mystifying secret: the more a church gives, the more it receives.

Do you believe that? Likewise, in the life of a family, an individual, you; the more you give, the more you receive. Giving is a law of nature, a principle of life; it's the very heart, the essence of God. The sun gives its energy that our planet might exist. Animals give their lives that we might eat. Plants grow, bloom, and die that we might have nourishment. Jesus gave his life that we might have eternal life. Dorothy Gilman wrote, "Life ought to be spent, not hoarded."

This principle even applies to money, perhaps most definitely applies to money. When you give money, you get it back! Crazy, but the more you give, the more you get. Oh, perhaps not in the same form, but you get all you need, and receive bonuses in unknown but miraculous ways. Some of you are nodding. You know in your experience that this maxim is true. Some of you are not sure. Some of you are skeptical. Probably all of you are willing to give when you are sure the home base is covered, when

there is enough to cover eventualities, but you are skeptical about taking the risk. But, that's the point. The more you hoard, the less you have. The more you give, the more you have. That's the secret of life. To live is to give.

There is a true story about a little boy who was born blind. His family heard about an eye surgeon at the Massachusetts General Hospital who had developed a new surgical technique. It was very expensive, but people in the church and community all contributed, and so the trip was made to Boston. As they were leaving, Mother noticed that he had tucked his teddy bear under his arm. The teddy bear had seen better days; some of the stuffing was popping out through a broken seam, one ear had been chewed, one eye was missing. "Why take this teddy bear all the way to Boston?" Mother asked. "When we get there, we can buy a brand new one." But, you know that wouldn't do. It had to be this teddy bear and no other. So the little boy took his much-used, much-battered, but much-loved teddy bear with him to Boston.

In the hospital, the little guy had his teddy bear tucked under his arm through every experience. Every test, every trip on the gurney, even into the operating room, the teddy bear went with him.

Then the day came when the doctor removed the bandages from the boy's eyes. He could see! He saw his mother's face for the first time. He saw the sky, flowers. He saw his teddy bear, and he loved it all the more. When the time came for him to leave the hospital, nurses, doctors, other personnel, all gathered to say "goodbye" to the little boy they had all come to love. The boy was sitting on the edge of his bed when the surgeon came to say, "Goodbye." Before the doctor could speak, the little guy said, "Doctor, I want to thank you for helping me." And he handed the doctor the battered old teddy bear.

For some months after that, if you had gone to the tenth floor in the Massachusetts General Hospital, you would have seen a glass case, and prominently displayed inside, a ragged old teddy bear, with this explanation, "This is the highest fee I ever received for professional services rendered."

To love is to give. God so loved the world that he gave... Do you dare to love?

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I THESSALONIANS 1:3

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