

This Above All

4 – Living Hope

John 13:34-35, 14:15-23

Psalm 119:1-16

1 Peter 4:1-19

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6th Sunday of Easter

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“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”ⁱ “Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.”ⁱⁱ It sounds so easy. Christians are called to love one another. Love all people, and especially love one another. Our great mandate as the Body of Christ is to love one another just as Jesus Christ loves us. Sounds so easy, but living it out is so hard.

A Sunday School teacher was teaching this lesson about loving one another to her class of six year olds and then asked them if they wanted to go to heaven. One little girl responded, “Not if all these other people will be there.” The teacher replied, “Well you can take comfort in the fact that Jesus promised that there are many rooms in his Father’s house. Now let’s pray.” The little girl prayed first, “Dear Jesus, please, please, please, as you prepare the rooms and make the reservations, don’t assign me to a room with....” You can fill in the name. Love for one another is hard, but love for one another is mandatory. Love for one another is not optional.

I used to enjoy reading the weekly op ed pieces by the late Southern humorist and keen observer of life, Lewis Grizzard. In one of his lively newspaper columns he wrote about the first miracle he ever saw. It took place in the little Methodist Church in Moreland, Georgia, where he grew up. Two boys in that community had gotten into trouble with the law. They were sentenced by the judge to go to the Youth Group at the Moreland United Methodist Church for six months. Grizzard remembered when the two rowdies came to his Youth Group.

The first night they beat up two other boys in the group and threw a hymn book at the nice lady who had volunteered to meet with them every Sunday night. She barely ducked in time. Later she said, “I don’t approve of what you boys did here tonight, and neither does Jesus Christ. But if he can forgive you, I guess I can too.” Then she passed a plate of cookies for them to enjoy.

Years later, Grizzard was back home, and he went to that little Methodist church on Sunday morning. He was recalling that story with some old friends who told him that these two rowdies had grown up to be good daddies, with steady jobs and, incidentally, rarely, if ever, missed being at church on Sunday morning. Louis Grizzard concluded his column saying, “It was the first miracle I ever saw.”

Louis Grizzard picked up on an important insight, that the transforming power of love gets worked out over time within the Christian community when we allow Christ to be at the center of our thoughts, words and actions – like that lady at the Moreland United Methodist Church.

We have been working on that in these last few weeks here at South Highland, and especially as we have been studying this little letter of St. Peter to the Christian Community in Churches of North East Turkey. Peter has been teaching us how to respond in times of struggle and suffering. This letter of living hope, come what may, has been unfolding before us week by week. In the midst of our own and now others' suffering from tornadoes, destruction, and death and in the midst of painful denominational changes and congregational continuity, there has been comfort. I do not believe is happenstance. I believe God led us to study this letter of living hope for just such a time as this.

The message is perhaps a bit repetitive, but it is a message we need to work at and work at until we really get it hope in, rejoice in, glory in the Lord, in the midst of suffering. Chapter four today reaches an all time climax, a definitive high water mark in verse 8, "Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins." This chapter divides itself into three major areas, **Spiritual Liberation** as we live by the Will of God, **Spiritual Love** as the key to it all, and the hospitality and service that flow out of such love, and **Spiritual Longevity - Stamina** that sustains us through the midst of suffering. The suffering of Christ remains our ongoing model. Reading together at verse 1, I invite you to keep your Bibles open to chapter 4.

I - Spiritual Liberation – As We Live By The Will Of God

“Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin), so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God. You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme. But they will have to give an accounting to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Mindful always of what Jesus Christ has done for us, how far his love went for us, all the way to his suffering on the cross. We are called to live by a new standard, not what is pleasing and comfortable for us, but what is the will of God for us.

Remember now Peter is not addressing followers of Christ who have been steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures, nurtured in the synagogue and taught the radical demands of the One God in the midst of an alien pagan culture. These are Greeks who have grown up as part of that alien, pagan culture, and who now are learning to be Christ followers. They are learning that God actually is at work in the world, had been in the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and now is at work in their lives. They are learning that they are actually to live by a new standard, God's will for their lives. That God actually desires them to live in this new and demanding way.

Hence, Peter ticks off a list of vices they previously enjoyed but now need to leave behind. He says, you after all, had quite a bit of time rocking and rolling around in those excesses. It sounds like a list fit for Alabama good old boys, as he calls them away from drunkenness, carousing, sexual looseness and the like. This stuff is timeless and seems to hit the human condition in the 21st century as powerfully today as it did in biblical times. Noah drunk in the fields, Abraham lying and call his wife, his sister to protect his skin, David who was rightly accused by the prophet Nathan of sleeping with another man's wife and then murder her husband to over up, to a recent President of the United States and a recent Governor of California who did the same. This propensity to sin is still intensely with us. Thank you, Adam. Thank you, Eve.

Peter says, friends, leave all that stuff behind. Come along now and live the new life, the Christ life. You will experience a difference. You will be living not for yourself but for God. You will actually be carrying out God's will for your life. Spiritual liberation as you live by the will of God.

I really am amazed at this remarkable fellowship of Christ's followers that is South Highland Presbyterian Church. We have been moving through a difficult season as we are seeking to be faithful in our denomination and in God's will for us here. Our town hall meeting last Wednesday was truly remarkable, a time of hearing the wisdom of the Session, and of hearing from varied voices across our congregation. As different ones stood and spoke, some gave witness to the truly miraculous faith transformation that had occurred in their lives, through this congregation, even as Louis Grizzard remarked about those two rowdies in his Sunday School Class. It was apparent that God has been at work among us.

A number of you shared how this congregation had welcomed and received you. Some of you have come out from rather troubled situations and you found here a hospitable welcoming people who really care. Someone remarked to me that, we probably would not have been able to share with the candor and openness we did if we had not been through our Unbinding Your Heart Small Group experience during Lent. There we learned to open up a bit more. To trust one another a bit more. To pray together a bit more.

So as we live into this new life, we are to seek out, discern and follow the will of God. Recognizing we are all of us sinners in need of grace, we hear then this strong central admonition to love one another. Verse 7,

II - Spiritual Love As The Key To It All

"The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that

God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.”^{iv}

Think of the power of this love Peter tells us is at work. Love covers a multitude of sins. We all have these sins, those such as already referred to and many other shades and varieties. But love covers them all. One of you on Wednesday night shared how you came here, battered and bruised, literally your front teeth knocked out as well as spiritually, and emotionally. You were broken, low, and this congregation picked you up, welcomed you and received you. You experienced hospitality here. Now you share your gifts here. It is significant how central hospitality is in the Bible. In the Middle East extending hospitality is not an option, it is an essential. Hotels and restaurants such as we enjoy were unknown in Jesus day. It was not simply a nice gesture to extend hospitality to strangers, it was a mandate.

Wherever Jesus went people opened their homes, their hearts, their dinner tables to him. South Highland is a really great example of what are sometimes called the three essentials of a Presbyterian gathering: Greeting, Meeting, and Eating. Peter is saying that extending constant love for one another is the most essential mandate for us. Love, as Paul says to the Corinthians, is the “more excellent way.” We can have all the spiritual bells and whistles, hope, and faith in the world, but if we do not have love, it is not worth a hill of beans. Without love we have nothing. Without love we are nothing.

We know these things, but we have to practice and practice and practice these things if they are to become part of us. As we love one another, we serve one another, we extend hospitality to one another. And why? “So that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ?” All things? Yes, all things. “To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.”

So how do we learn to love? Only by putting love into practice. Learning to love begins deep within our hearts. We love because God first loved us. We love as we come to terms with the idea, the good news, that we are loved quite apart from our deserving, quite apart from anything we have done or failed to do.^v The way we learn to love is by letting God’s love work within us, as a grain of sand works in an oyster then becomes a pearl. Then we take steps to act like Jesus would act if he were here in our place. Which is where we believe he is, when we are his.

Henri Nouwen once said,

“If we wait for a feeling of love before loving, we may never learn to love well. Mostly we know the loving thing to do. When we ‘do’ love, even if others are not able to respond with love, we will discover that our feelings catch up with our acts.”

I think that is what we heard from one another and learned from one another last Wednesday night. I think that is what some of our folk are learning and experiencing in these days. Some the past few weeks have been in Kenya, Africa putting in a water purification system, and learning to receive from and give love to Kenyan brothers and sisters. Some this

week are in Piedras Negras, Mexico building a house for and building relationships with a poor family whose lives will forever be changed because of the love that will be exchanged. Some will be in a few weeks, sharing love with children through our Vacation Bible School, and then a few weeks after that some of those same people, children, youth and adults will take that same Vacation Bible School to the children up at the Lovelady Center, a large half-way house for women coming out of prison, where they can live in this facility with their children. Our children will work with their children and God's love will be shared as they share.

Finally Peter reminds the believers of his theme of suffering recurring in this little letter time and time again. Don't be surprised by or undone by suffering. Verse 12,

III - Spiritual Longevity - Stamina That Sustains Us

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even a mischief maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name. For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And ‘If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinners?’ Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.”^{vi}

Troubles will surely to come to us all. We know that far too well. Suffering is virtually certain sooner or later. So when we suffer for our faith, when we suffer for the name of Jesus Christ, we are blessed. Now do not use your faith as an excuse to go out and raise hell. But “if you suffer as a Christian,” when you do suffer as a Christian, “do not consider it a disgrace.” Instead take opportunity to give glory to God through it all.

We Christians are a broken people. We the congregation of South Highland are flawed and fall short of this glory of God and this will of God every day of our lives. Yet, as we saw demonstrated here Wednesday night, in the midst of a situation that was very painful for all, as we struggled between grace and truth, as we struggled to find and follow God's will, in the midst of our pain and our perplexity, we truly embraced one another as sisters and brothers, different in so many ways concerning so many things, yet united fully on the things that matter most. We experienced life together as we were and are learning to, “above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.” Dear brothers and sisters, that is the Good News, that is the Gospel of God. Believe it. Live it. Love one another.

“To God alone belong the glory and the power forever and ever, through Jesus Christ. Amen.”

“And everyone of tender heart,
Forgiving others, take your part.
O sing ye! Alleluia!
Ye who long pain and sorrow bear,
Praise God and cast on God your care!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!”

ⁱ John 13:34

ⁱⁱ 1 Peter 4:8

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Peter 4:1-6

^{iv} 1 Peter 4:7-11

^v Paraphrased from a sermon by John Buchanan, “New Commandment”, preached 3-21-10, at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL.

^{vi} 1 Peter 4:12-19