

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, June 5, 2005

"Fueled by Love"

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Text: I Corinthians 13:1-13 John 15:12-17 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God of love, open our hearts to your Word for us today, so that we may love as You love us. Amen.

Louise, Martha, Woodrow Beulah, Steve, Lonnie . . . R.C., David, Mitchell . . . those were the names of my mother's older brothers and sisters on the day she was born, October 16, 1926.

Her father, my grandfather, was a farmer in northeastern South Carolina. October 16th was going to be a wonderful day, a day of excitement, the day his youngest child was born. But almost all the joy of her delivery melted away into a terrible grief when his wife, my mother's mother, died giving birth.

What a traumatic event that was for the entire family! My Aunt Martha spoke about that day many years later. She told about the heartache she felt after her mother's body had been removed, and then seeing my mother, not even a day old, snugly wrapped in a blanket, lying on that big, empty bed.

My grandfather was left with ten children, from Aunt Louise who was 17 years old to Mama who was a day old. Granddaddy loved his children – with tenderness, compassion and resolve. Three years after Mama was born, the stock market crashed and the Great Depression began. Granddaddy prayed and worked and prayed and worked, so that his ten children would have enough food to eat, clothes to wear, a warm and dry shelter, and a loving, Christian home.

His devout faith in God saw him through.

I was thirteen years old when Granddaddy died. Even at that age, I sensed such a genuine and pervasive feeling of grief – in my mother and in my aunts and uncles. They loved him so much because he had loved them so much! When their world was falling apart, Granddaddy was there and he loved them.

Love is the most powerful force in the world. This kind of love is the fuel for the church's mission.

Faith, hope and love are the fuel that ignited the first-century Church. During the last two Sundays we have discussed faith and hope. Today we focus on love. The apostle Paul writes the Corinthians, “Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (I Corinthians 13:13) Love is the most powerful force in the world.

The Church is designed around the Great Commandment – to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The church is designed around relationships. Without relationships, the church ceases to exist. Relationship to God and relationship to others are what the church is all about.

One day Kim McManus was riding in a car with her young daughter, Mariah. Kim suddenly turned to her and said, “Mariah, I love you to pieces.” Mariah responded, “Mommy, I love you whole.”

That is what love can do. God's love makes us whole. It unites us, heals us, takes the broken fragments of our soul and makes us new people.

The Church erupted out of an act of sacrificial love – Jesus' death on the Cross. The Church fulfills its mission when it is fueled by love. When people in a church are not motivated by love, we go round and round in circles. We become self-centered. Not much worthwhile happens.

Listen to this “love” letter to Johnny from Marie: Dearest Johnny, No words could ever express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you. I love

you. I love you! Yours forever, Marie P.S. And congratulations on winning the state lottery.

That's not the kind of love I am talking about!

Jesus once told his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35) The way the world will know that we are Jesus' disciples is if we love one another. Love is so central to the Church that without love, we have no claim to be disciples of Jesus. If we are not willing to love, Jesus will look at us and say, "Who are you? I don't know you."

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus tells us, "Love one another, as I have loved you." (John 15:12) This is a step up from "Love your neighbor as yourself." Not only am I to love you as much as I love myself. I am to love you as much as Jesus loves me. Wow! That's a lot!

Then Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (15:13) Jesus was speaking of his own impending death. He was explaining that his sacrifice would be the ultimate expression for the love of all humanity. When we love God and others so much that we are willing to offer our lives for them, that is a powerful love! When people in the church have that kind of love, nothing can stop us. We become an unstoppable force in mission for Jesus Christ.

Erwin McManus is the lead pastor of Mosaic, a church in Los Angeles. Recently he received a telephone call from Asia telling him about a situation related to an event not many months away. 500 overseas Christian workers were serving in China and Mongolia with the sole purpose of offering Christ to those nations. The leaders had asked Erwin to come and speak to an annual meeting. He was to bring messages to people who had spent most of the year without Christian fellowship. He was planning to bring a worship team with him.

In this telephone conversation, Erwin learned that the support structures needed to hold the conference had fallen apart. Now the event was dependent upon volunteer teams coming from the United States. Erwin asked them, "What do you need?" The person on the other end of

the line replied, “Everything: preschool teachers, children’s teachers, middle school and high school workers, worship team, drama team, dance team, any counselor or administrative help.” As they went through the list, it appeared that nearly 40 people would be required to fulfill these responsibilities. This meant that 40 of their adult members would need to take two weeks off work and contribute over \$1,000 each, so that they could go change diapers and work nonstop during the conference in Thailand.

After a few hours of telephone calls and about a week of time, over 40 people were committed to taking work off, finding money, and going to serve. That church ended up taking 42 people to serve those 500 workers.

How did that happen?! It happened because those 42 people really loved God. They loved those Christian workers in China, like Jesus loved them. This kind of love produces servanthood. It views sacrifice as a privilege – just like my Granddaddy did so many years ago. This kind of love is the most powerful force in the world. This kind of love is the fuel for our church’s mission.

Jesus loves us so much! Now it is our turn to love – today, tomorrow, next week. Now it is our turn.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion is an opportunity to remember and experience God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. We remember just how much God loves us. This meal is also your opportunity to express to God your love for him. It is a chance to express your desire to live for Christ, to receive Christ into your life, and to accept his mercy and grace. When you receive the bread and the cup later in this service, take this as an opportunity to rededicate your life to him. You may kneel and pray at the chancel rail after you receive the elements if it is meaningful to you.

Thank God for his love and for the chance we have to live in it. Amen.