

## **“Life in the Spirit: The Greatest Gift”**

July 27, 2014

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday at Lake Harbor UMC – Spiritual Gifts Series

How many of you thought of a wedding when you heard the Scripture read today? Some of us may have even chosen those words to be read on the day we were married. But Paul’s words aren’t just for weddings. In fact, they were never intended for weddings. We’re inclined to overlook what it means for us as the church in favor of reading it as a romantic love poem. But remember that Paul wrote to a church in conflict in Corinth.

They just weren’t getting it. Spiritual gifts aren’t given by God for personal gain or to create a hierarchy in the church so someone can say that one gift is better or more important than another. And let’s face it: it’s easy to get caught up in going after personal power even in the church!

Spiritual gifts are given to build up the Body of Christ, and in turn, build the Kingdom of God here on earth. When we use our gifts, it makes a difference in the church, but also makes a difference in the world. Spiritual gifts always point to the Giver - to God. And even more, when spiritual gifts are offered, our lives point to the greatest gift - to God’s love.

We use the word “love” a lot. English just has one word for “love.” But in Greek, there are four different words used for “love.” There’s eros – romantic, sexual love – that’s where we get the word erotic. There’s phileo – friendship love – think of Philadelphia or philanthropy. There’s storge – family love – love for people who are like you. In all of these forms of love, something is received in return.

Here in Corinthians, Paul uses the word agape. Agape love seeks goodwill for another...promotes another’s well-being....sacrifices for the sake of others. Agape has more to do with attitude and action – not so much with emotion and feeling. Agape love gives – receiving nothing in return. Agape love doesn’t look for a reward. Agape in us is cultivated when we consider Jesus’ love for us. Agape shows in acts of care, support, and justice. Right away, maybe you’re thinking – that’s not easy. And you’re right!

Though we might love this passage, though it might remind us of a special day in our lives, we have to hear it for what it is. This is a challenge to each of us - to love agape style. After Paul has celebrated the gifts of the Holy Spirit, how each one is important to the Body of Christ, and how those

in the church depend on one another for a full picture of God's gifts in the world, then we have this kicker. We have to love, which doesn't come easily for us. We have to choose to show agape love.

So how is it possible? If God wasn't loving toward us, would we ever take notice of others? Could we even attempt to use our spiritual gifts, to serve for the sake of Jesus Christ, if God didn't love us with God's steadfast, never-changing, never-failing love? No! This agape love begins because of Jesus coming to be with us - to be incarnate - in the flesh. And we're able to love this way because Jesus is taking up residence in our lives.

Love - agape - is the motivator for service. We can have all the gifts. I can be the best preacher the world has ever seen, but if there's no understanding of love - of that kind of love that God shows us in Jesus - then it won't matter. You can have the gift of administration or hospitality or serving, but if it's not offered in love, then it's empty of meaning.

For Paul, spiritual gifts and service are connected. We serve with our spiritual gifts because they are given to us from God. God gives them to us in love - agape - and calls us to use them with that same kind of love. If we don't speak with love, nobody will listen. If we don't act with love, nobody

will pay attention. It all makes sense, I know, but we have to internalize it.

It's easy to sit here and agree, but God's Word needs to fall afresh on us,

even this familiar passage. We can't be faithful without love!

Richard Fairchild story: When I was a kid I remember a time when my mother decided to make up some chocolate nut fudge or something very tasty like that.

She had all these wonderful ingredients assembled on her kitchen counter and all these lovely smells wafted around the room, and she was busy whipping something up on the stove.

I checked it out — and discovered that it was a pan half full of this lovely chocolate sauce and so I did what all normal children would have done — I asked for a taste.

Mother told me that I could have some when it was ready — but I of course put on a sad little face and said, “Just a little taste please!?”

She then told me I wouldn't like it but I didn't believe her — I mean, what was there not to like — lovely chocolate sauce — just a little spoonful — and so, relenting, she gave me a taste.

It was awful. It was bitter. It wasn't like chocolate at all. Yet it looked like chocolate and my mother assured me, as she laughed at my puckered-up face — that it was all chocolate and nothing but chocolate.

And that was the problem with it: It was nothing *but* chocolate. It lacked something very essential to make it taste really good: It lacked sugar.

“Though I have all chocolate, but have not sugar ...”

Of all the gifts that God gives to us, love is the greatest without question. Faith brings us into right relationship with God through Christ, and because of faith, we have hope. Love is wrapped up in both, and love

is eternal. When it comes down to it, love is the greatest gift - the greatest gift that we receive from God in Jesus Christ - and the greatest gift that we give to others in the name of Jesus Christ when we use our spiritual gifts. Our giving takes many forms, but it all grows out of love. Our gifts are amazing and varied, but love is what motivates us to serve.

A colleague of mine, Pastor Erin Fitzgerald, serves in Grand Rapids very near the area that was hit by the tornado a just a couple of weeks ago. She's been posting progress about the relief effort for families whose homes have been destroyed or are in need of repair. She relayed "When we pulled up the floor and insulation, we discovered scripture verses written on the plywood underneath! Signs of hope in the midst of disaster and tragedy." And guess which picture she posted? A floorboard that read: Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Powerful words and witness to the power of love in our world!

We saw what happens when people refuse to open their gifts. Even if one gift is undiscovered, held back, or simply unwrapped, there's a missing piece. The whole isn't complete. One of our younger folks said this about the unfinished puzzle: That's a messed-up church! Sometimes it takes those very honest words to remind us that our faith in Jesus Christ demands a response. Love - agape love - is a choice that we make. And it's no coincidence that the missing piece is the cross - the symbol of agape love that goes all the way for us and sends us out to love and serve in the name of Jesus - our Lord and Savior. FINISH PUZZLE

May love - agape - be the greatest gift that we celebrate and share.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

*Perhaps God is speaking to you today – the Holy Spirit is moving in you in a mighty way and encouraging you to use the gifts that God has given you. Perhaps God is calling you to make a commitment to a life with Jesus.*