

“Love, Honor, and Cherish!”

August 10, 2014

6th Sunday at Lake Harbor UMC – Spiritual Gifts Series

There’s a line in the musical Les Miserables that’s so powerful for me that no matter how many times I’ve seen it performed live or listened to the soundtrack, I still get a lump in my throat. It comes toward the end when Jean Valjean has experienced a life of both hardship and grace, love and loss. And in the end, he sings: “To love another person is to see the face of God.”

For me that’s a line that speaks of real transformation, and I think it’s what Paul is trying to convey to Christians in Rome long ago. He has told them that they have spiritual gifts and that they are one body. But he keeps pushing them to live as one body in Christ - to love, honor, and cherish one another as beloved by God and important to each other.

I can tell that one example of this came as I experienced Unity Christian Music Festival this week. It wasn’t just a bunch of people together. The Holy Spirit was there, and it was clear that something was happening. I heard one woman say, “I’ve never praised Jesus with this many people before!” And another woman said, “Isn’t this wonderful?” We’re fortunate to have servants from Lake Harbor who offer their time and gifts. Unity is a witness to our community and beyond that the Holy Spirit is at work!

And if I’m honest, I know that everyone gathered at Heritage Landing might not agree on everything. We know that all of us gathered in this sanctuary don’t always agree on everything. And yet we are one body in Christ! And the simple, stark message of the video is true: Loving others is hard!

Think of a time when you were challenged – when loving someone was inconvenient, messy, time-consuming. Maybe it was offering a ride to a family without a vehicle or making a phone call that you knew would take more time than you wanted to spend or talking to the person asking for

money or having a conversation with someone when you weren't getting along.

Loving others does change someone, and it's usually you and me – because we get a little closer to God when we do it. We understand a little more clearly what it must be like for Jesus to love us because we're difficult to love.

It's hard to love within a family, and Paul knew it was difficult within the Body of Christ. Believing doesn't make it automatically easy to love each other. Sharing faith in Jesus doesn't mean that everything will be fine all the time. Loving others is hard.

It's easy to love those who love you, but what about those whom you find difficult to love? Jesus mentioned something about that. Hear from him in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 6:

³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. ³³And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. ³⁴And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

How do we love one another in the church – in the world – and get along?

If you remember when we focused on Paul's letter to the people in Corinth, this might sound similar. Roman Christians received the same message. Yes, you all have gifts. Yes, everyone's gifts are important to the whole body. But if you don't love one another, it won't work!

In our humanity, we can get competitive. And remember that was a part of the problem. Folks forgot that grace was the greatest gift that God gave to them, and that included their spiritual lives and their spiritual gifts. Paul says that when love – agape love – is present, then there's unity and grace. There's no room for hierarchy or divisiveness because our focus is on God's grace first. And God's grace informs everything we do.

What's the easier way to live? It's the "me-first," get what I want when I want, selfish way. But the call of Jesus Christ and the transformation that Jesus works in us points us to look at others before ourselves and live selflessly and sacrificially.

It's even praying for our enemies. How many of you find that difficult? In the middle of a crisis in the world where we're not sure who's who and what's what – and what's happening where – and who's doing what to whom – and the news of people being killed because of their faith, this is particularly difficult. Loving others is hard. Living our faith is hard.

Looking at this part of Paul's letter, I get overwhelmed. This is a long list, and it's tough! But then I realize that Paul is calling us not just to follow of list. This is a lifestyle. This is how we're called to live because of God's mercy to us. A pastor-friend of mine posted this on Facebook: "Sanctification is not getting rid of our temptations, but pursuing holiness in the midst of them." Growing in faith in Christ doesn't mean that everything a smooth road. In fact, it means that we fight our desire to conform to the world every day!

We use our spiritual gifts to serve one another in love – and to serve the world God loves. Putting our gifts into action is a part of our commitment to Christ and the church – Christ's body. And the gifts are powerful! And they are more than we can count! Paul offers a starting place, but we know that our gifts are shared in many ways. Those of you who are gifted in hospitality can greet in the parking lot, at the door, and look for those who may be visiting. Those of you who are ushering might have that gift to welcome others as if they were Christ himself.

We see here that using spiritual gifts draws us into relationships with others in the body of Christ. And sometimes that's tough! Being in the church doesn't mean that we agree or get along! I know that might sound strange, but it's true. What we do have in common is that each of us is beloved by God so much that he offers us new life in Jesus Christ. What we do have in common is that each of us stands in need of God's grace and mercy. We are sinners who have fallen short of all that God intends for us,

but we are also those who have experienced redemption. Our lives show hope, peace, joy, and love that is possible through faith in God.

How do we serve one another in love and get along? That “in love” part is the key phrase. We have to love as God loves. We have to honor one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. We have to cherish God’s grace as the foundation of our faith in Jesus Christ. Love, honor, and cherish – not just the one you’ve chosen to spend your life with, but love, honor, and cherish others as God’s beloved.

Remember how we talked about sacrifice here in Romans? Remember how most of us really don’t like the idea of it? Remember how Paul names it as a part of our worship of God – seeking God’s will and doing God’s work?

It’s when we read the practical ways that we’re called to sacrifice that it really hits us! Trying to overcome evil with good – making those choices that might go against the crowd, choices that are unpopular or misunderstood. Loving one another as brothers and sisters with tenderness and respect – knowing that we need each other to be faithful – even when it’s tough. Honoring others more than we do ourselves – you mean it’s not about me? Being zealous – excited and enthusiastic about our faith – and ready to serve the Lord. We need to know our spiritual gifts if we want to carry this out fully!

Being joyful in hope – even when life throws us curveballs. Being patient in affliction – when we face the deepest difficulties. Being faithful and determined and intentional in prayer – when we’re unsure about what’s next with our health, our finances, our families, our struggles. Sharing with God’s people in need - being generous and friendly.

To do these things is to put grace into practice. We do this in the church as we live our faith together - sometimes with differences of opinions and yet with respect and care. We practice grace when we worship together and serve together. When we interact with love and compassion, we take on the personality of Jesus Christ. We are the body of Christ, and our call is to show who Jesus is to those around us.

Roman Christians were facing a specific issue of hospitality, too - how to treat refugees who were returning to Rome - many of them who had been oppressors to the Jews. So there was resentment, which is why Paul addresses how we treat one another even when there has been conflict. Being transformed in Christ calls us to a higher response - to forgive and seek peace with one another and to live as those who follow Jesus.

Transformation is still a call for each of us. When we refuse to conform to the evil and injustice around us, and instead offer ourselves and our gifts to be used for good and for the building up of God's Kingdom as they are intended for, then we experience transformation.

Love, honor, and cherish. God's grace at work in us calls us to be different than the world around us and yet willing to engage in the world. It's messy and hard and inconvenient, and it's right where we have to be because people need to know that God loves and cares.

In your bulletin, there is a bookmark. This is our challenge every day. If each of us read these words every morning and allowed them to transform our day - maybe allowed them to lead us as we went to work or went to the store or went to the doctor's office - how might we be ready to act in love so that we would be transformed and so that the world would be touched by God's love? I invite you to commit to live in love this morning. And even if there's one thing on this list that you can do - one way that you can allow God's grace to work through you - then your life, our church, and our world will be transformed.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.