

Britt Carlson  
January 31, 2016

11 o'clock am

Community Church of Issaquah  
Issaquah, Washington

### **"Making Room"**

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

In 1273 AD, the theologian Thomas Aquinas had written a hundred books when he had a mystical experience of God during a church service. After that moment, when asked of his writing, all he could say was, "All that I have written appears to be as so much straw after the things that have been revealed to me." He never wrote again.

Seven hundred years later, Mother Teresa, the great saint who served society's rejects in India for over fifty years, who took a vow of poverty, who opened up homes for the dying and destitute said, as reflecting on her ministry, "It's not how much we give, but how much love we put into giving."

The wisdom and deep knowledge of Thomas. The simple, extravagant humility of Teresa. These are some of the markers of sainthood. And yet facing God, both Teresa and Thomas confirm the words of 1 Corinthians 13 that in the presence of love itself, their sacrifices and their work are nothing. For both, the love that created heaven and earth was and is *everything*. Outside of love is as Thomas said, straw, that which easily burned up.

What is it about love? In some ways, love undoes all of the things we thought were best about our lives—our degrees, our hard work, our service. I've thought about love a lot. I've studied theology and philosophy, I've been well loved, I've fallen in love, and *even still* understanding love is beyond my grasp. We can all recognize love when we see it, but it's so hard to describe. It's so hard to pin down. It's the thing that ties us together, the thing that makes everything okay. It's the substance that brings us back to one another when we have a hard time finding our way.

The past two weeks, we've been talking about life in the Body. We've said that our life in the body is a gifted life. Each part has its specific gift, and when all the gifts work together it leads to a healthy, active, life-filled Body built up in Christ. But this week Paul is saying that the glue that keeps everything together is this mysterious quality, love.

Now nurses out there, correct me if I've got my science wrong, but love seems to be like the lymphatic system. The lymphatic system takes our blood and cleans it. All of the toxins that build up from living our everyday lives have to be taken out so that the body doesn't become toxic. That is what love does. When we live in love, the resentments and irritations and jealousies that come from being in relationship are swept away to be cleaned up and replaced with fresh, clean blood.

You see, in life in the body we can't help but be affected by one another. As we read last week in 1 Corinthians, what happens to one part of the body happens to the other part—both joys and sorrows. It can be easy to fall into thinking of each other as isolated units, to think of people as islands, drifting separately apart in the vast ocean of life. But that was and never will be the case. 1 Corinthians makes it clear. We are one body. And what's more, like our physical bodies, we are constituted by our relationships. And I want you to hear this: *Our relationships actually make up part of who we are*. The heart cannot truly be a heart unless there are lungs to oxygenate the blood. The feet cannot truly be feet unless there are legs to move the feet. As crazy as it sounds, who we are is made up in part of other people. Our relationships constitute us. I think the best way I've seen it described is like this:

We are like nodes. Our personhood, our individuality are points. But we're connected. These lines are our relationships. Mother to son. Friend to friend. Husband to wife. They make up a part of our personality. And here's the catch: when one of those relationships is taken away, a part of ourselves is taken away. We literally lose a part of who we are.

Anyone who has lost someone they love knows this. Life is not the same after we lose someone because we are not the same. As much as we like to think we are self-sufficient, self-made, pull yourself up by your bootstraps kind of people, that is revealed as a nice lie when those we love die. It's a lie because we don't just live to ourselves. It's like the poet John Donne says,

No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thy friend's  
Or of thine own were:  
*Any man's death diminishes me,*  
Because I am involved in mankind,  
And therefore never send to know for whom the  
bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.

The bell tolls for us and we know it because we have been made part of one body in Christ. When we love someone, we make room for them in our lives, and when they are gone, it leaves a space empty within us.

The author Judith Butler says it most frankly, "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite

one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other."

This is what love does. For better or worse it undoes us. It is a glorious undoing, but it is an undoing. It is an undoing that binds us to something deeply. When we make room for others, we ourselves are changed. Our priorities are changed. How we spend our money is changed. What we think is good and beautiful is changed.

You know, it's not only people that we love. It's not only people that draw out this kind of change within us.

Wendell Berry is an author and a sixth generation farmer in Henry County, Kentucky. He tells the story of his father's father:

"[My grandfather] owned his farm, having bought out the other heirs, for more than fifty years. About forty of those years were in hard times, and he lived almost continuously in the distress of debt... In one of his difficult years he plowed a field on the lower part of a long slope and planted it in corn. While the soil was exposed, a heavy rain fell and the field was seriously eroded. This was heartbreak for my grandfather, and he devoted the rest of his life, first to healing the scars and then to his obligation of care. In keeping with [his] commitment, he neither left behind the damage he had done nor forgot about it, but stayed to repair it, insofar as soil loss can be repaired. From that time, my grandfather and my father were soil conservationists, a commitment that they handed on to my brother and to me."

That is love. Love is patient. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. Berry's grandfather loved his land. That is what love makes you do. Love makes you stick around to see things through till the end. Love makes you set things right even at a cost to yourself. Love

always hopes that things can be what they should be.

But here's the amazing thing about all of this talk about love. And this is what this entire sermon is actually about: Love isn't primarily about you and me. Love is primarily about God. *God is love*. Sometimes I think we wouldn't have dared to say that if the Bible didn't teach us to say it. *God is love*. God is *undone* by us. God—fully complete, lacking nothing, absolutely perfect—made room for us out of love. We say that God created the world out of nothing, and what that means is that there was and is absolutely no reason that we exist except love. We exist *because of* love and *in order to* love. And not only do we exist because of God's love, but we can know what true love, divine love, the love that created us looks like, because we know Love Himself—Jesus Christ. Jesus was and is Love incarnate. He is 1 Corinthians 13 walking and talking.

Just think. In Jesus, we see that Love is patient as he explains the kingdom time and time again to disciples who are slow to catch on. We see that Love is kind as Jesus disregards his followers and says to all of the little children, "Come unto me." We learn that Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude because Jesus doesn't lord his divinity over his followers, but he washes their feet, he eats with the lowly, he talks with women and sinners. We can know for a fact that Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing: Jesus did not rejoice in overpaid taxes or over-used religious authority but his very presence led to Zacchaeus paying back the of the defrauded four times over and to the shame of pompous religious leaders.

This is Love with a capital L. Love incarnate and born of the virgin Mary.

If you look closely at all of Jesus' qualities, you'll see that each one of them makes room for people. At Jesus' table there is room for the poor

and the rich, the young and the old. Jesus loved people and he felt the sting of that love. Jesus's tears over Lazarus' death are not false tears. They are real tears of real loss. Jesus felt like we feel the pain of human relationships come to an end. Our Savior knew what death means to us humans.

But this is the good news: through Jesus, love becomes stronger than even the grave. Love endures through and past death. Love conquers ALL. Our ties that bind us to each other, our ties that have undone us, those ties are not ultimately disintegrated. We have the sure hope through the love of God that those ties will endure. That the room we made within us for our children, our parents, our friends, for everyone we loved, that room will be filled again. Restored through the resurrection of Jesus. So hear the words of 1 Corinthians 13 with joy. Joy that we can be undone by love. Joy that we have made room for others in our lives. Joy that those ties do not have to be broken forever, but will be restored through the eternal, unending love of God.

"God's love is patient. God's love is kind. God's love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. God's love for us never ends." Thanks be to God. Amen.