



The First and Last Word is....

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 16, 2024

2 Corinthians 5:6-17 (Read using The Message)

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God's love, as we heard Paul say, has the first and last word in everything we do. How hard is it to live like that? Extremely hard, and why? Because even though God created us in love, the world in which we live is the domain of Satan and his minions, as anyone who has read Revelation start to finish knows.

If you don't believe it, just take stock of how many times in a given day you are tempted to put yourself first above the well-being of others. Running a red light just after it has turned from yellow because you got tired of waiting in traffic through endless light changes. Making a hasty left turn in front of an oncoming car when you could have waited a few seconds for the coast to be clear. Someone is talking to you, your phone buzzes and you allow yourself to be momentarily distracted. Who is it? Oh, just a robocall. Was it worth injuring the dignity of the other person for that split second? And yes – they did notice.

These are examples most of us can identify with, but Paul is setting much higher stakes here. What is the sum total of our life when that reckoning comes? We modern-day Lutherans don't necessarily ascribe to the image of the pearly gates where St. Peter will grant us entry, or not. Rather, Paul says we are to work urgently with everyone we meet to get them ready to face God. But this work applies to each of us, as well.

It happens not through preaching or proselytizing but through example. How in our daily lives can we become the embodiment of God's love? How can our lives emanate from the focused center of Christ's supreme sacrifice, the giving his life for us out of love so that every day we die with him – die to the old person – and be raised with him, as a new creation? See: The old has passed away. Everything has been made new!

Our situation today in this country is strikingly similar to what Paul was addressing in this letter, 2 Corinthians. Corinth was the melting pot of the ancient Mediterranean, the Las Vegas of the ancient world. Bombarded by many cross-cultural forces the church in Corinth had become weak. Church members were surrounded by idolatry, immorality, and an abject lack of ethics. First Corinthians had been well received in addressing specific moral issues, but in its wake contrary voices began to relentlessly slander Paul and call his authority into question. He therefore wrote Second Corinthians to defend his position and denounce those who were distorting the truth of the gospel for personal gain.

What we can take from this letter and from today's passage specifically is that LOVE is the only way forward. This is not a cliché, but a commandment, and the greatest of all – love your neighbor as yourself.

It begins with loving yourself, not in a prideful way that elevates you above others, for that is not love but hatred. Pride tricks you into thinking your personal preferences are paramount, and saddles you with goggles that allow you to see the world only through the narrow lens of self-centered need.

True love of self begins in the acceptance that you were created in the image of God – the very image. Once you are able to see yourself with all your perceived bumps and bruises and faults as a unique and unparalleled expression of God's love -- unparalleled because God's love is infinite and God's expression of love through us is also infinite -- then this acceptance of who you are comes to govern every human interaction.

If on the other hand we are not able to truly love ourselves as created in God's image, then our disappointment, distaste, or even disgust in ourselves is inevitably projected onto others. This is the sole and exclusive reason that human interactions go awry. It is not because of what someone else has done to you, it is because of the way that you reacted to whatever they did. You reacted not in love but in self-defense because you did not believe that you were protected and surrounded by God's love, and therefore you felt the need to project your own dysfunction onto the other party.

No matter what other people do to you, if you can position yourself in God's love as the beginning and end of your response to their action, the kingdom of God will be proclaimed through you. This does not mean lying down and letting someone steamroll over you again and again, but crafting a response that is grounded in respect for the personhood of the other party. Because after all, they -- just like you -- were created in the image of God. And if it happens that you have to duck and cover for a little while before you can arrive at that response, then so be it.

What else does God's love made real in us look like?

It looks like creativity. Remember Covid? A saying goes: "The devil said 'I've closed all your churches.' We said, 'No, we've opened them in everyone's parking lots.'" I was not here for your Covid services but in my Wisconsin church, the parking lot experience became everyone's favorite thing to do. After the service they honked in appreciation. Going back inside was almost a disappointment.

God's love made real looks like collaboration. Engaging with community organizations and supporting their activities. I had a great first week back after vacation. I joined the Souderton-Telford Rotary, I made an appointment with Mayor Girard to ask how Grace can serve the community. Yesterday at Founder's Day, Barb, Sue, Kay and I totally sold Rep. Steve Malagiri on the idea of our Soup Suppers.

God's love made real looks like engaging. Cathy Farrell is leading us into a face to face journey with single mothers through a local organization you can read about in Grace Notes called Bridge of Hope. Our Summer Youth Service Camp will clean cages at Dogtown Rescue, play

bingo with residents of Paradise Manor, and work at the Garden of Health, among many other activities.

God's love made real looks like seeing the world through the lens of the weakest, not the strongest.. God's love made real means asking everyday, ordinary citizens "What brings you hope? What brings meaning to your life?" and then inviting them to join you in new initiatives that respond to what they are telling us.

God's love made real means embracing the truth that, as Paul says through Eugene Peterson's interpretation, "One man died for everyone. That puts everyone in the same boat." We meet every new day and every person that passes through it in the midst of this truth. Out of love, one man died for everyone.

God's love made real does not look like what I experienced on Friday sitting through endless light changes. At one point I saw a decal on the car next to me consisting of a shredded backwards American flag superimposed with a terrifying-looking skull. I tried to research this image and learned that the decal is marketed "to show off your patriotism," but in this case the driver had purposely applied it backwards. I truly do not know what he was intending to convey to his fellow road travelers. How can this be a helpful thing?

I am more convinced with every passing week that the church is our only hope, because only the church understands the love of Jesus Christ as the first and last word in everything we do. There is a false church that is somehow getting a foothold, an agenda-laden movement that is grounded in the attitude of "us versus them." But it's easy to see there is nothing Christian about it. The true church of Jesus Christ sees through the eyes of the weakest and desires to endow all God's people with the same measure and gift of new life.

But our sight goes beyond even that. We people of faith have the privilege not only of seeing the world as it really is, but of having that same view encompass all of eternity. Faith is the confidence in things we cannot see, and faith carries us across the bridge of time to eternity. So we live in the present moment but we are also alive in Christ, who is "the same yesterday, and today, and forever." Cling to this hope!

Amen.