



ELCIC National Bishop Susan C. Johnson's Sermon
LWF Council - Arusha, Tanzania
Sunday June 29, 2008
"The commandment of love"

Psalm 28

I Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; 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. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Matthew 11:25-29

At that time Jesus said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. **'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.**

It is such a pleasure and an honour to be with you today and to be given the opportunity to preach. And I bring you greetings from your sisters and brothers in Christ from my church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

The lesson from first Corinthians today reminds us that we are commanded to love one another. In fact love is given primacy even over faith and hope. So I want to ask you a question. How are you doing at loving?

I don't know what it is like for you here, but in North America popular culture has made use of the word love almost meaningless. Not only is love overly sentimentalized in pop songs, but advertising would have us believe we can love everything from cars to pizza. And people greet each other with the words "I love you" instead of hello or goodbye! Is this what St. Paul was talking about?

When I preach at weddings I love it when the couple picks 1 Cor 13 as a reading. Usually it is picked because the couple thinks that the way that St. Paul describes love is an echo of the love they have and will always have for each other. You know, patient and kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, not insisting on its own way, not irritable or resentful.

In a wedding sermon I always say to the couple, I hate to be the one to break it to you, but even though you love each other, you will be impatient, unkind, envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, irritable, resentful, and you will insist on your own way. Hopefully this will not all happen on the same day!!!!

The reality is that loving one another, really loving one another, is hard work. Love is a risky business. It can lead to rejection and hurt and disappointment. There are no guarantees. And let's face it – most of us like guarantees. Ask anyone who has experienced a failed marriage or a broken relationship how hard it is to risk loving again.

It's easy to love some people – our families and our friends. But we don't always love even all our relatives - the expression we use is “you can pick your friends but you can't pick your relations”. So sometimes even our families remind us that there are limits to what or who we can love.

And I think that part of the problem with our ability to love is that we don't think that we ourselves are very lovable. And so we have problems accepting love. The love of other people and the love of God. If we thought that we were basically good or maybe even perfect people then perhaps we could accept love more easily. But we know that we are not that way - we have faults and flaws, weakness, and blind spots, parts of us that seem to be unlovable. And so we sometimes find it very difficult to accept that we are lovable.

We know that we have a lot in common with the Israelites in the Old Testament. Constantly messing up. Have you ever noticed how in the Old Testament we hear what seems to be the same story again and again? God loving the children of Israel, and they respond with some kind of grumbling or rebellion. And then God get's angry, but in the end God forgives them one more time. And it happens over, and over, and over, again.

And we are a lot like the children of Israel - we too have a tendency to mess up and we too never seem to learn from our mistakes. And so we are left recognizing our inability to love and our inability to be loved.

And then into our broken world and broken lives, in spite of our shortcomings, in spite of our flaws, in spite of our ongoing rebellion and grumbling, God sends Jesus. And Jesus says to us **Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.** This act of God's gracious love, of God's abundant love, fills

us with awe, it is so overwhelming, so unlike anything we have ever experienced. Because, God's love isn't like our love at all. It is so much bigger and broader than the love that we experience or are capable of. It reminds me of the words from Romans chapter 5, that "*indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person - though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves His love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us*". God's mercy, God's salvation, God's love, all are offered to us, not because of our merit, but because of the gracious and abundantly loving nature of God.

We worry that we are unlovable, that anyone who really knew us - all of us, including the parts of us we would rather hide away - would never be able to love us and so we close ourselves off to love. But the truth of the matter is that God already knows all of our faults and our mistakes and our imperfections. And God loves us anyhow. God deals with us like the children of Israel, constantly forgiving us and giving us yet another chance. It boggles the mind, but it's true! Not only that, but our God who loves us each individually and overwhelmingly despite our faults also loves all of those people who we find unlovable.

Let me share with you an experience I had at my ordination. On the day of my ordination as bishop, I was terrified. Scared for what the church was asking me to do. Then we came to the part of the service, like every ordination service, where I was kneeling at the altar rail and the congregation was singing "Come Holy Ghost our hearts inspire". And I was praying with a fervency I have never experienced before, asking God for the wisdom I need, and the strength and courage and grace I need to do this new thing that God and the church have called me to do.

And I was praying with my eyes closed, but suddenly it was as if I opened my eyes and saw that someone had come up to me without me noticing them. And because they are standing right in front of me and I am kneeling I can only see them from about mid-chest to the knees. But it

was Jesus. And Jesus didn't say anything to me. All he did was reach forward and wrap his arms around me. And I could feel the pressure of his arms on my arms and on my back. It was an amazing experience.

The message that came through to me was that I was loved, deeply loved, just the way I am. And the other message was that Jesus loves you, each one of you, just the way you are as well. And that Jesus is holding you in a strong and loving embrace as well. You may not feel it, and I know that I was blessed to have that experience. But our God has you wrapped up and does not let you go 24/7 whether you are aware of it or not.

So how can we possibly respond to God's amazing love? We are called to respond to God's great love by loving God and loving others in return. And God entrusts this to us knowing full well our shortcomings and limitations. How can we help but respond? We are called to be God's agents of love and healing and reconciliation and justice and hope as we live out our daily lives. This is no occasional thing, but a full-time way of life that we are called to live out. And perhaps slowly, if we begin by looking at others through God's eyes of love, we will end up being able to love and serve those around us, even the ones who might initially seem unlovable.

I ran across a poem this week that I think sums this up. "When our love, even for our children, breaks; God's love holds. When our love, even for ourselves, fails; God's love endures. When we can give no more, for we have no more love to give; God gives God's own child." That is the kind of love we receive from God, and that is the kind of love that we are asked to share with the rest of the world. May God strengthen us and equip us for our loving service. Amen.

