

Alive: Spirit of Love – Loving Neighbor

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, 13

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On Good Friday this past year I happened to see a Facebook post by a friend that was, shall we say, theologically controversial. I happened to agree with what she posted, but not everyone did. Dozens of people weighed into the conversation. Conservatives called liberals “heretics” and “false teachers” while liberals called conservatives “stupid” and “backward”. It got political, and it got ugly and mean. And toward the end of the trash talk the most insightful comment simply said, “And this is why I’m not a Christian.”

How sad that on Good Friday, the day that Jesus died to reveal the depth of God’s love for us, those who claim to be followers of Jesus resorted to demeaning one another and calling one another names...all in the name of Jesus. How crazy is that? Jesus didn’t say, “They’ll know you are my disciples by your doctrine.” He said, “They’ll know you are my disciples by your love.”

We’re in a worship series called “Alive.” We’re talking about the ways in which the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit gave birth to a movement in the world that continues to arise through you and me. And while that movement is marked by faith and hope, its most distinguishing characteristic is love.

Before we go any further, let’s make sure we all understand how this love thing works. It all begins with God’s love for us. It always begins with God’s love for us. Not because we deserve it. Not because we’ve earned it, but because it is the nature of God to love. The author of 1 John put it best when he wrote, *“This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us...”*. When we entrust ourselves to that love, when we have faith that that incredible love is for us, it compels us to love God right back. And that’s what Pastor Jason preached about last weekend.

But that isn’t where love ends. In fact, biblical love can not end there. Biblical love is always bigger than

“me and sweet Jesus.” The kind of love that Jesus calls us to, the kind of love that the bible proclaims always includes love for our neighbor. Always. Again, the author of 1 John put it so well when he wrote, *“If we say we love God, but hate others, we are liars. For we cannot love God, whom we have not seen, if we do not love others, whom we have seen.”* Love for God and love for neighbor are two sides of the same spiritual coin. They cannot be separated.

Now, I don’t know about you, but I’m feeling just a little squirmy inside right now because I like to say that I love God, but there are people in this world that I just don’t like. People who talk too much and chew with their mouths open. People who don’t go when the light turns green because they’re too busy texting. And, of course, people who have wounded me, offended me, betrayed me. Or worse, people who have inflicted pain on someone I love. You too? Hold onto that feeling for just a moment while I read today’s Scripture reading – familiar words from 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, 13,

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

That squirmy feeling I mentioned a minute ago, that sense of guilt that we say we love God but know full well we don’t always do a great job at loving our neighbor? If you’re like me, that feeling just grew. Dramatically! Patient and kind? Not easily angered? Sure, some days. But far too many days I’m an epic failure at that kind of love. And chances are, so are you. So, let me give you a little good news.

Most of us have heard Paul’s beautiful words describing love in the context of a wedding ceremony. And that’s perfectly appropriate, but it can lead us to think that what Paul is describing is primarily how we are supposed to love one another. But that isn’t so. Paul is primarily describing how God loves us. Always loving. Without end. And that means two really important things.

First, it's a reminder that God doesn't hold our failures against us. Paul says that love keeps no record of wrongs. Wow, is that good news, because if God did keep a record of my failures to love well...well, let's just say it would be a multi-volume set. Instead, learning to love well is a life-long journey. It's something we practice. And practice means that we try and fail and learn and try again. Love is always a risk because love calls us to vulnerability but practicing love does not risk our relationship with God. As Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, *"...neither death nor life... nor anything else in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."* So, we are free to try and fail and try again when it comes to love.

Second, you don't have to make yourself more loving. Let me say that again. You don't have to make yourself more loving. You don't need to manufacture more love in your heart. Truth is, you can't. But God, through the Holy Spirit, grows the fruit of love in you. I don't understand exactly how that works any more than I understand exactly how apples grow on the branches of the tree in my backyard. But here's what I do know – the love of God is so healing and compelling that it births in us a deeper love for others.

When I was a sophomore in college, I joined a fraternity. There were lots of great guys in my pledge class, many of whom are still friends today. But there was one guy I didn't much care for. He was loud, a bit obnoxious and boastful. Looking back I think I didn't like him because he was a bit too much like me, but at the time he just grated on my nerves so I tried to stay away from him. In that same year of college I experienced a powerful rebirth of faith, and at that point in my life what connected with me so deeply was this overwhelming sense of being loved by God. For the first time in my life I began to listen to, rather than merely endure, the Sunday sermon and I heard the clear connection between loving God and loving my neighbor. And so, I began to pray about my relationship with that fraternity brother who rubbed me the wrong way. And while it didn't happen overnight, I was amazed to find my heart warming toward this guy who used to irritate me no end. Today, I consider him a good friend.

I'll say it again – I don't know exactly how the Spirit births love in the heart any more than I know exactly how apples grow on the branches of the apple tree in my backyard. All I know from my experience is that it happens. That's the Spirit alive and at work in our lives.

Maybe you're here today and what you really need to hear is how deeply and completely you are loved by God. Sometimes the rejection that we've experienced from other people, or the trauma we've suffered in life, or our own guilt and shame cause us to doubt that God could truly love us. If that's you, I want you to hear that the cross of Christ proclaims, *"This is how wide my love is for you, and this is how far I'll go to show it."* Entrust yourself to that love.

Or maybe you're here today and it isn't the love of God for you that you're struggling with, but your love for your neighbor. Maybe there's someone in your life that just rubs you the wrong way or someone who wounded or offended you and you cannot find any love for them in your heart, but you'd like to. Jesus commanded us to pray for our enemies, and so I want you to pray for that person you're struggling to love every day this week. Ask God to bless them, and to fill your heart with genuine love for them. You might just be surprised at what fruit begins to grow on the branches of your heart. Now, with that person in mind, let's start that prayer practice right now...

Gracious God, we confess to You that the depth of the love in our heart can be awfully shallow and sometimes just dry. There are people in our lives that we struggle to love because they rub us the wrong way or they've wounded us deeply. Would You teach us to rest in the depth of Your love for us, and to trust that Your Spirit is filling our heart right now in this moment with love for someone we're struggling to love well. And that person that we've brought to mind, we pray for them now... that You would bless them, that You would heal them, that You would grant them peace that passes all understanding, that You would lay a straight path of blessing for their life. And again, we pray that You would fill us with a love for them that surprises us. All this we pray in the name of the One who revealed the depth of Your love for us, a love that never runs dry, never runs out, never ends; in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.