

“The Core of Christianity”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

May 23, 2004

Text: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love”
(I Corinthians 13:13).

Last year the Thomas Nelson Publishing House made quite a stir with its publication of a copy of the New Testament titled *Revolve*. It was marketed as a Bible for teenage girls. Apparently these teenagers told the Nelson researchers that they didn't read the Bible because as they put, “The Bible is freaky and we don't read it.” So now thanks to the wonder of American marketing and the Thomas Nelson Publishing House, teenage girls have a Bible of their own (except for the Old Testament). *Revolve* doesn't really look like a Bible. It is brightly colored and resembles a teen magazine, complete with cute models in designer clothes, dating columns, and makeup advice.

I thought of *Revolve* this past week, when I read a story in *Christianity Today* about a teenager, named Elizabeth, who lived in a small village in Southeast Asia. She too grew up praying, trusting God, and hoping to go to college. Although Elizabeth's parents were Christians, they were very poor and not able to provide for their daughter, so when a relative offered to take Elizabeth to a neighboring country where Elizabeth could find work, her parents agreed. However, things did not turn out well for Elizabeth. Her relative betrayed her and she was sold to traffickers who forcibly confined her in a house of prostitution where she was ill-treated and sexually abused for seven months. A group called International Justice Mission (IJM), who forced the police to raid this brothel where a number of teenage girls were being kept, finally rescued Elizabeth.

During the time of her imprisonment she kept the Bible that her parents had given her. When the police arrived, they found written on the walls of the cell where she lived these words: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?"(Psalm 27:1).

In Elizabeth's world specialty Bibles were neither available nor necessary. She is one of the millions of young people who live on what Bob Seiple calls, "the cruel edges of the world."

We live in a society that drives publishers to create a profusion of Bibles for people who consider a profusion of options their birthright. But in the end, the Bible is not a makeup mirror, casting a flattering soft light and showing us mostly ourselves. It is a window into a larger world of tragedy and hope.

I.

Nowhere is this larger world of tragedy and hope more apparent than in Paul's great chapter on love that is found in I Corinthians, Chapter 13. Many commentators believe that Paul did not compose this chapter, but rather it represents a text or hymn that was in use in the early church. But there is considerable evidence to believe that Paul wrote this chapter. Almost every line finds a correspondence to the rest of the Letter to the Church at Corinth. In fact this chapter speaks to one of the greatest problems that the church faces, the problem of factionalism. In Paul's day factionalism manifested itself in personality cults that had developed in Corinth. There was, apparently, a group in the church who were devoted to Paul. Another man named Apollos, who was apparently a very gifted speaker fascinated another group. Some had been particularly impressed with the Apostle Peter, so there was a group that bore his name. There was even a "Christ" party.

Today, divisions in the church are not that different. There are "liberals" and "conservatives," "evangelicals," and "social activists." There are those who are drawn to the church by a certain minister, music program, outreach ministry, or a host of other things.

Over against this kind of factionalism Paul introduces the concept of Christian love. For Paul the love of which he speaks is not simply an emotion or feeling. It is the core of our faith. In fact, the Apostle Paul is so bold as to say that if you possess the ability to speak in tongues, if

you are prepared to sacrifice your life, if you can prophesy, but you have not love, than you are nothing more than a noisy gong or clanging symbol.

Paul goes on to describe this kind of love that the New Testament calls “agape.” In doing so he tells us what real love is not. It is not arrogant or boastful; it is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in the wrong but in the right. Then Paul goes on to make a claim that in some ways seems unbelievable. “Love,” he writes, “never fails.”

II.

Now, in some ways that is simply not true. Love often fails, obviously, egregiously, tragically. Sometimes love fails because of those who exercise it. Sometimes it fails in families. Sometimes parents, seeking to love their children, fail them by becoming overindulgent, overcontrolling, over possessive. Sometimes, even in marriage, love fails. Sometimes husbands and wives become self-absorbed, controlling, possessive, jealous and envious, to the point that this strong force which brought these two together finds a breaking point where two people who once loved each other now cannot abide being in the same room. A Psychiatrist friend of mine said that half of the people who seek his help come because they are not married, and the other half come because they are!

Sometimes love fails not because of the weakness of those who exercise it, because of the weakness of those on whom it is bestowed. Sometimes even the greatest love cannot overcome the most reluctant heart. Certainly Jesus loved Judas. He called him to be his disciple. He entrusted the financial welfare of the group to Judas. But Judas betrayed him. Certainly love can fail.

III.

But having said this, it is also true that the Christian faith stands or falls on the basis of our ability to demonstrate the love of God in Jesus Christ. The writer of I John puts it like this: “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (I John 4:1).

Some years ago the church was struggling to find itself in the midst of the great Enlightenment of the Nineteenth Century with the advent of a new science, new history, and new psychology. Today the problem is not knowledge but love. It is Christians learning to love Muslims and Palestinians learning to love Israelis. Without this kind of reconciliation we are not likely to be able to sustain life, as we know it, in a world of terrorism and suicide bombers.

Several years ago when I was visiting Washington, D.C., I spent several hours on the Mall. I found myself drawn once again to the Lincoln Memorial, which memorializes one of our great Presidents. On the wall of the memorial are the words of the Second Inaugural Address in which Lincoln addressed a defeated South. Lincoln astutely observed that both the North and the South read the same Bible, prayed to the same God, and invoked God’s aid against the other. Lincoln went on to observe that the prayers of both could not be answered and that of neither has been fully answered. Then without relinquishing the conviction that slavery was unjust, Lincoln

offered this caveat to a soon to be defeated nation. “With malice toward none and charity to all” he spoke, “with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

That is a love that does not fail.

IV.

Then, too, love does not fail because in the end it is the most powerful forces in the entire world. That is what Paul means when he concludes this chapter by saying, “Now faith, hope, love, these three abide; but the greatest of these is love.”

Sometimes, when I am in this sanctuary alone, I look to this beautiful Celtic cross which was given by a former minister of this church and which came from the Island of Iona in Scotland. In many ways the cross represents one of the great failures of humankind. An innocent man, Jesus, was betrayed by his own people and crucified by soldiers that represented the imperial power of the Roman soldiers. Two thousands years later the Roman Empire with its great Caesars is nothing more than a distant memory while the cross of Jesus Christ adorns millions of churches, cemeteries, hospitals and homes across the world. The person who trusts in violence trusts in a God who cannot create or organize anything permanent; in the long run it is only love that does not fail.

A number of years ago a Presbyterian minister by the name of Ernest Gordon wrote of his experiences in World War II in a book entitled *Through the Valley Kwai*. In that book Gordon described his long siege as a prisoner of the Japanese Army. He and thousands of other prisoners were beaten and killed at random. The conditions of the camp were brutal and there was great cruelty not only between captor and prisoner but also between the prisoners themselves.

On one occasion Gordon recalled that the Japanese guards accused the prisoners of stealing one of the shovels. The lead guard said he would kill all the prisoners unless someone confessed to stealing the shovel. A great silence fell over the prisoners. Finally, one of the prisoners spoke out. “I took the shovel,” he said. The prisoner was immediately shot and decapitated.

Later that evening, when the shovels were counted again, it was discovered that there had not been a shovel stolen. The prisoner who confessed to the crime was obviously innocent. He had confessed, however, to save the lives of the other prisoners.

That experience, Gordon writes, was a defining moment for the whole prison camp. Suddenly the words of Christ came alive for them: “Greater love hath no man than he give his life for his friends.”

Suddenly, Gordon observed, the whole prison camp was transformed. Prisoners began to care for one another. The whole atmosphere changed. For the first time the prisoners learned to be content with what they had. They lost all bitterness and hatred. Even after the war was over, the Allied prisoners refused to take revenge on their captors.

For Ernest Gordon it was also a personally transforming experience. After the war he decided to go into seminary and become a minister. After his graduation from seminary he served for many years as the Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University.

That is what Paul means when he says that “faith, hope, love, these three abide.” Surely there is nothing more needed in our personal lives, our family lives, in the life of our community and in the troubled world today.

May God shine his light on us in such a way that they may know we are Christians by our love.

Amen!