

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, Charlottetown – October 4, 2020

Hymns: 692 – Where charity and love prevail; 694 – This is my commandment;  
695 – Although I speak with angel's tongue

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Colossians 3:12-14

Sermon Title: The Sixteen Signs Pt. 3 – Signs of the Soul – Forgiveness and Love

*1 Corinthians 13:4-7 – “The Message”*

*Love never gives up.  
Love cares more for others than for self.  
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.  
Love doesn't strut,  
Doesn't have a swelled head,  
Doesn't force itself on others,  
Isn't always “me first,”  
Doesn't fly off the handle,  
Doesn't keep a record of the sins of others,  
Doesn't revel when others grovel,  
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,  
Puts up with anything,  
Trusts God always,  
Always looks for the best,  
Never looks back,  
But keeps going to the end.*

*Colossians 3:12-14 – “The Voice”*

*Since you are all set apart by God, made holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with a holy way of life: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Put up with one another. Forgive. Pardon any offenses against one another, as the Lord has pardoned you, because you should act in kind. But above all these, put on love! Love is the perfect tie to bind these together.*

We're in the thick of our series on “The Sixteen Signs” – the sixteen indications Paul lays out in his letter to the Colossians of the Spirit of God at work in our lives and in our church. And today we are going to look again at the group of four which I call “Signs of the Soul” – signs that our soul is in the right place with God, and in which the Spirit of God has shone its healing light. These are signs that have to do with the starting place for a life which benefits others, and blesses us as well.

The four signs are Patience, Tolerance, Forgiveness, and Love. Last week, we spent some time on patience and tolerance. This week, we move on to the two characteristics, the two qualities of the Christian life most emphasised by Jesus in his teaching to us,

and most exemplified by Jesus in his life among us – the qualities of forgiveness and love.

I had the great pleasure last week of joining together in marriage Ivan and Miranda Kljajic, and was reminded again how the traditional wedding service – and a long running, successful marriage - can teach us a great deal about forgiveness and love, and how we might apply that understanding to the other relationships in our lives.

So let's start with the centre of the wedding service – the vows. Those of you who are married may have said these very words; others may one day look forward to saying them; still others of you may successfully avoid ever having to say them. Here they are:

- To have and to hold, from this day forward
- For better, for worse
- For richer for poorer
- In sickness and in health
- To love and to cherish
- As long as we both shall live.

When I am preparing a couple for marriage, we spend quite a bit of time talking about what these vows mean. When I am conducting a wedding ceremony, I ask the bride and groom to forget about the photographer and the reception and all the other wedding distractions, and to pay attention, to focus upon one another, because these vows are the point of the whole thing. Those of you who are already married, consider this a refresher. Those of you planning someday to marry, consider this a warning. Those of you in neither category, feel free to relax.

So, the vows - Better, worse, richer, poorer, sickness, health – to love and to cherish as long as we both shall live. That's a pretty good way to understand love – a commitment, entirely independent of external circumstances, to cherish the other person. Cherish, by the way, is a neat word: Webster's Dictionary gets almost poetic as it tries to define it. *“To treat with tenderness and affection; to nurture with care; to protect and aid; to hold dear; to encourage, foster and promote;”* that's almost a sermon in itself.

In preparing for marriage, I remind the couple that they are pledging to love and cherish one another in all these ways: “For better, for worse; for richer for poorer; in sickness and in health,” as long as they both shall live. Not just in the better times, the richer times, the healthy times – but as long as they both shall live.

Now I have couples who try to get around this. Some try to get romantic, and, perhaps on the basis of a movie they saw, or some other such influence, they request the vow be rephrased to “as long as we both shall love.” Which sounds all lovey-dovey, but isn’t at all what the vow is getting at. “As long as we both shall love” falls into the romantic trap of believing that love is a feeling, rather than an act of commitment, rather than a decision to treat someone in a particular, self-sacrificial way. And while there are things that we call “love” that are feeling-based, that’s not the kind of love which Jesus is either teaching us about or demonstrating to us.

If you want to show me what real love is, show me love that continues to be committed to the other, even when that other person is utterly unloveable. Like a three-year old, throwing a tantrum in the middle of a busy store. Or a teenager, explaining to you in words of one syllable how unreasonable and demanding and out of touch you are as a parent. Or a man going through major mid-life crisis. Or a woman, going through – no, I’ll just leave that there. If you can love any one of these, then what you’ve got there is a love based not on feeling, but on sheer commitment.

And that’s why the vow quite rightly says, “as long as we both shall live.” Otherwise the vow becomes, “as long as we’re both feeling romantic.” I actually had a couple request (unsuccessfully) that I change the vow to “as long as we’re both having fun.” You laugh, but I think that is even more realistic than “as long as we’re both feeling romantic.” I can have fun with lots of people for whom I have no romantic inclinations whatsoever. The vow is, “To love and to cherish, As long as we both shall live.” And if you really need to restate that with different words, you might try, “To treat you with kindness and consideration, actively seeking what is best for you, until the day I die, no matter what.” No matter what.

Now, let’s stop thinking about marriage, and start thinking about church. I think a pretty good way to welcome new members would be with the same vow, more or less, as a we make at a wedding – maybe without the “to have and to hold” part. Because this is the kind of love with which Jesus insists we treat each other. Not just husbands and wives – each other. Brothers and sisters in Christ. You. Me. We are to treat one another with kindness and consideration, me actively seeking what is best for you, you for me as long as we live, no matter what. Look around – that’s how you are supposed to treat that guy. And that gal. And all those other folks sitting right here, right now. You’re supposed to love them, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health. Here’s how Jesus put it (John 13:34-35 NIV): *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

Notice what Jesus didn’t say: He didn’t say, “Love those people you find particularly loveable.” Nor did he say, “Love only those people who treat you lovingly

first.” On the contrary; Jesus said (Luke 6:32-33 NIV): *“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that... But love your even your enemies, do good to them... Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.”*

And I hope the people around you this morning aren’t exactly “enemies.” Our love for one another is to be a reflection of God’s love for us, and of our love for God. We love God by loving one another.

OK, one more angle. People sometimes speculate, “Gee, if only Jesus were preaching this morning instead of Rollwage, I wonder what he would say.” Well, good news. Jesus sent me a copy of his sermon. It goes like this (John 15:9-17 NIV):

*“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends... This is my command: Love each other.”*

OK, so we’re supposed to love each other – not just husbands and wives, not just parents and children – but each other. Here. These people around you. Obviously, romantic love and the attendant gooey feeling is not the kind of love we’re talking about. So what kind of love is it? Well, try this on for size:

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, 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. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)*

We think of these as wedding words, but Paul didn’t write them for a wedding, he wrote them for a church, for a congregation that was having all sorts of difficulties getting along. Can we, as a church, manage to love each other? To be patient and kind with one another? To not be envious or boastful or proud or arrogant or rude? To look out for the interests of the other person, to keep our temper with one another and – get this – *“to keep no record of wrongs?”*

*“To keep no record of wrongs.”* Wow. What a great way to express, “to forgive.” To keep no record of wrongs. You know, it isn’t possible to love someone very long, if your love for them is based upon them never somehow offending, or disappointing, or

even wronging you. If our love is based on someone's infallibility, it is a very, very fragile and temporary love.

Any marriage worth the word needs to have forgiveness at its core. You will find this hard to believe, but even I fall short of perfection as a husband. Admittedly, not very often, but still. I know I need forgiveness from Dana for those rare times I have been challenging to live with. And this is true not only of marriage - any friendship worth its salt is one in which friends are able to forgive one another for rash words, for broken promises, for falling out of touch. In terms of church, any church that has the slightest hope of survival is a church in which people are willing to forgive one another for the disagreements and slights and offences inevitable in our lives and interactions together. Forgiveness is the key in any relationship which hopes to be based on any kind of permanent commitment to love.

And here's the facet of forgiveness which Paul in our reading from Corinthians highlights for us this morning: "to keep no record of wrongs." It is one thing to forgive: it is another thing still to then put it behind you, and just let it go. Not to ignore whatever happened – not to file it away for some future date – not to keep it ready for when you need to bring it out and use it as a "remember when you did this to me" weapon. No, to acknowledge it, to deal with it, to forgive it, and to then let it go. To put it behind you. Not between you: behind you. "To keep no record of wrongs."

How can we do this? Why should we do this? Because God has done it for us. *Even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do*, is how Paul puts it. Listen to the Psalmist, as he realizes the enormity of the forgiveness and love of God (Psalm 103:8-12):

*The Lord is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever.*

*He does not punish us for all our sins; he does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve.*

*For his unfailing love toward those who honour him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west.*

A man has died, and finds himself in heaven. As time passes, he is granted an audience with God. As he approaches the heavenly throne, God calls to him by name. "You remember me?" says the man, incredulous.

"Of course I remember you," says God. "I remember you as you grew in your mother's womb. I remember the day you were born. I remember your first day of

school, your first prayer, your first love. And I remember when you opened your heart to my forgiveness, and my love, when you decided to follow my Son.”

The man is reduced to tears. “How could you love me, God, after all the times I disappointed you? How could you have forgiven me after the sins I committed?”

“Your sins?” says God. “I don’t remember those.”

*For his unfailing love toward those who honour him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west.*

Love and forgiveness – the key to marriage, the key to friendships, the key to being the kind of Church God would have us be. These are the signs that our soul is in the right place with God, in which the Spirit of God has shone its healing light. These are signs that have to do with the starting place for a life which benefits others, and blesses us as well. Let’s start now. Amen.