

A Tribute to a Woman's Love

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 — Matthew 22:34-46
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
October 29, 2017 — 21st Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Tom Thews

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 (NLT)

¹ You yourselves know, dear brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not a failure. ² You know how badly we had been treated at Philippi just before we came to you and how much we suffered there. Yet our God gave us the courage to declare his Good News to you boldly, in spite of great opposition. ³ So you can see we were not preaching with any deceit or impure motives or trickery. ⁴ For we speak as messengers approved by God to be entrusted with the Good News. Our purpose is to please God, not people. He alone examines the motives of our hearts. ⁵ Never once did we try to win you with flattery, as you well know. And God is our witness that we were not pretending to be your friends just to get your money! ⁶ As for human praise, we have never sought it from you or anyone else. ⁷ As apostles of Christ we certainly had a right to make some demands of you, but instead we were like children among you. Or we were like a mother feeding and caring for her own children. ⁸ We loved you so much that we shared with you not only God's Good News but our own lives, too.

Matthew 22:34-46 (NIV)

³⁴ Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

³⁷ Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

⁴¹ While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, ⁴² "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. ⁴³ He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, ⁴⁴ "'The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" ⁴⁵ If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" ⁴⁶ No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

A Tribute to a Woman's Love

A true story appeared years ago in a publication named The Pathfinder. It was about a woman who had made an enormous impact on her community.

If you look at a map of Alaska you will see a thin, wavy line about midway between Nome and Teller, Alaska. This line is known as Mary's River. It was named for an Eskimo woman many years ago who lived along the shores of the river with her husband and their two children.

But then tragedy struck — the village was hit by a deadly flu. This happened during the gold rush era when men were frantically searching for gold in the Alaskan wilderness. The flu took the life of the woman’s children and her husband. Fourteen other children in the village lost their parents to the flu. Out of compassion, this woman adopted all 14 of these children.

She also extended her hands of kindness to gold prospectors, offering them accommodation and feeding. The miners who had a difficult time pronouncing her Eskimo name opted to simply call her Mary, as suggested by one of the miners who said, “It’s a grand old name.” To honor her kindness to them, the miners named the stream that passed by her home “Mary’s River” — and it remains Mary’s River to this day.

But there’s more. When teachers from the United States founded schools in the little river village they, too, heard the story. So they named the settlement “Mary’s Igloo.” Maps today show this settlement too. As the village grew, other things were named for her. Now there are Mary’s trees and Mary’s reindeer. Mary married a second time and, of course, he was known by one name only — “Mary’s husband.” If you ever get to Mary’s River, Alaska, I hope you will remember this story — it is a monument to the power of this woman’s love for her family and neighbors.

We all know how important love is to our lives. In today’s lesson from Matthew’s Gospel we read these words: “Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested Him with this question: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’”

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

We’ve heard those words many times, but they are still breath-taking. Everything that it means to be a Christian can be boiled down to these two simple commandments.

LOVE IS AT THE CENTER OF OUR FAITH.

How can we minimize the importance of these verses? This is what Christian faith is all about: Love for God and love for one’s neighbor.

Note that both of these commandments are in the Old Testament. After all Jesus said He had not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it — or as someone has put it, “to fill it full.” The people of Israel needed to be reminded of what was central, what was fundamental, what was truly essential in their faith — just as Christians need to be reminded today.

Some of you are familiar with the name Amy Carmichael. Though barely known in Europe and the Americas, like Mother Teresa, Amy Carmichael made a name for herself in India, where she touched the lives of thousands of women.

Carmichael was born and raised at the end of the 19th century in a Presbyterian home in faraway Ireland. When she turned 16, she made a bold move by packing her things and moving to Belfast. Her goal: to establish a Presbyterian mission for women who worked in mills. It didn't take her long to meet with success, as the membership of her mission grew to more than 500 women.

But Carmichael knew that wasn't really what she wanted to do with her life. Her ultimate goal was to be an overseas missionary. And she finally got her opportunity. After a brief stint in Japan, she was posted to India.

Carmichael had a strong spirit. The hot and unfriendly climate of India did not deter her from fulfilling her dream. Neither did the dangers missionaries often encounter. However, she suffered dreadfully from neuralgia which oftentimes left her no choice but to run her mission from her bed. When her condition grew worse, she was moved back to her home in Ireland.

After a period of rest she again returned to India stronger and better, and this time channeled her efforts to rescuing young Indian women who were working as prostitutes in Hindu Temples, a work at which she was highly effective.

Instead of returning home after completing her assignment, Carmichael chose to spend the rest of her life in India. She went as far as dyeing her skin with coffee to make it match that of the Indian people, and this allowed her to travel safely around the country.

Carmichael spent the last 75 years of her life in India without for one day setting her feet back in Ireland. Sadly, due to a bad fall she experienced, she suffered paralysis for the last 20 years of her life. But Carmichael's efforts eventually led the government to ban temple prostitution across India in 1948.

After her death, Amy Carmichael was buried in India. The children she saved erected a birdbath over her grave with the word Amma inscribed on it, meaning "mother" in the Tamil language.

Love is at the center of our faith. Amy Carmichael personified that love. Who can help but think of St. Paul's great words, "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal (I Corinthians 13:1)."

I am firmly convinced that the skeptical eye with which the world regards the Christian community today could quickly be transformed into admiration and respect if we simply lived out these central two teachings of the Master. Love is essential to our faith as followers of Jesus Christ.

LOVE IS ALSO ESSENTIAL TO OUR PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING.

You've probably heard of that sad study that was made years ago of ninety-seven babies, ages three months to three years, in a South American children's home. These babies were well fed, clothed, and had good medical attention. But there was no one to love them or play with them.

After several months these babies began to lose their appetites. Their health failed. Within two years, thirty-four were dead and twenty-one were beginning to have numerous physical and emotional problems. These lives were being destroyed for lack of only one thing. They were emotionally starved. They had everything but love. Love is essential to our physical and emotional well-being.

Pastor John Ortberg tells of an exhaustive research project on relationships called the Alameda County Study. "Headed by a Harvard social scientist, it tracked the lives of 7,000 people over nine years. Researchers found that the most isolated people were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections.

"People who had bad health habits (such as smoking, poor eating habits, obesity, or alcohol use) but strong social ties lived significantly longer than people who had great health habits but were isolated. In other words," says Ortberg, "it is better to eat Twinkies with good friends than to eat broccoli alone."

"Harvard researcher Robert Putnam notes that if you belong to no groups, but decide to join one, 'you cut your risk of dying over the next year in half.'"

That is how powerful love is. Love is essential to our physical and emotional well-being.

Douglas Davidson, editor of *The Other Side*, in an article titled "*Welcome Home*," cites a study that examined the effects of World War II bombings upon children in London, England. "Children who stayed in the city during the bombings, going into underground shelters with their parents, actually fared better, psychologically and socially, than did those children who were taken out of London to a safe place in the country, away from the bombs, but also away from their families. Even though the children who remained in London faced the very real possibility that their houses might be destroyed and that they might be physically harmed, they nevertheless found a higher level of peace, not in external security, but through significant relationships."

The prominent psychiatrist Karl Menninger was featured in an article carried by the Chicago Daily News titled, "Love working miracles for the mentally ill in Kansas." Dr. Menninger contended that love is one of the most effective cures in healing mental illness. When reporters asked Menninger how it was that 80% of his patients recovered, he replied, the secret is not in electroshock, surgery, group-therapy, drugs, etc. These play a part, but the real secret is contained in a single word: LOVE!

Love is at the center of our faith. Love is essential to our physical and emotional well-being. And that brings us to the last thing to be said:

LOVE IS OUR PRIMARY CALLING AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST.

How will the world know we are Christians? By our love. John 13:35: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Love is our primary calling. Love for God and love for our neighbors.

I read a story recently that inspired me. It grew out of the Olympic games of 1988 in Seoul, South Korea. These Olympics captured the attention of people around the world. The games were filled with glitz — records were broken, winners became household names.

You may remember the name Ben Johnson of Canada. Johnson broke a record in the 100-meter race. His fame soared high afterwards — until he failed a doping test which showed he took performance-enhancing drugs. The gold medal which was stripped from him was given to Carl Lewis, an American runner who had taken second place.

For Canadians the event would have been a completely disappointing outing, but for a fellow competitor named Lawrence Lemieux of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Lemieux saved his countrymen from total embarrassment.

Lemieux, an experienced yacht sailor was well on his way to clinching silver in the yacht competition. Competing in the Olympics had been his life-long dream. But then something happened that no one ever expected.

Joseph Chan of Singapore was racing close to Lemieux when he lost control of his yacht. When Lemieux noticed him, Chan’s yacht had already capsized. Chan was struggling in the water. He was injured, barely staying afloat. Without a second thought, Lemieux abandoned the race and reached out for his fellow sportsman and brought him aboard his own boat.

Unfortunately, his act of bravery and sportsmanship cost Lemieux the silver medal which had been well within his reach. But Lemieux’s act of bravery wasn’t about to be forgotten. At the closing ceremony of the 1988 Olympics, organizers of the games rewarded Lemieux efforts by awarding him the Pierre de Coubertin Medal, a medal awarded to athletes who display an exceptional spirit of sportsmanship.

In an interview after the Olympics, Lemieux said “As a sailor, your duty first is to people in distress... medals can follow afterwards.” According to him, he only wanted to do what was right and not to be a hero. Saving a distressed soul according to him is worth more than going after medals.

That is certainly true. You and I will probably never compete on the world stage, but each of us can reach out and make a difference in the life of someone who is struggling.

A woman called Mary did that in Alaska and, to this day, her name is all over maps of that state. An Olympic athlete did that and earned his country’s praise for his sportsmanship. Who is there that you and I can show Christian love to? Who do we know who is struggling to whom we can reach out?

An expert in the law tested Jesus with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

That says it all. Love is at the center of our faith. Love is essential to our physical and emotional well-being. Love is our primary calling as followers of Jesus.

2017 @ Copyright Rev. Thomas Thews