

**THE LANGUAGES OF LOVE:
#1 – WORDS OF AFFIRMATION**

(02/13/11)

Scripture Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12:31; 13:1-13
Luke 6:27-36

*“And now faith, hope, love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”
(1 Cor 13:13)*

For the next five or six weeks I would like us to think about love. Love is an especially relevant topic for today since tomorrow is Valentine’s Day. I think it’s wonderful that we set aside a day to celebrate love. After all, if we have National Pickle Week and National Hot Dog Month, we should set aside at least a day in honor of love.

Last week the scripture lesson was taken from the 12th chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. I have used this chapter, which addresses the matter of spiritual gifts, several times this fall. I used it as a call to share our time, talent, and treasure with our church on Stewardship Sunday and also when we welcomed new members. I used it again last week, on the anniversary of my ordination, when I preached on our call to ministry through the sharing of our gifts with our church and with the world.

In the 12th chapter of this letter Paul tells us that there are varieties of gifts, but they arise from the same Spirit. There are varieties of activities within the church and in the world, but it is the same God who activates them in everyone. Within the church Paul mentions the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, prophecy, the discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues and interpreting tongues. Paul tells us “all these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.”

Then Paul says, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good.*” This is why I use this chapter around stewardship time or when we are welcoming new members. Our gifts and talents, even our money and financial resources are not meant for us alone. If we selfishly hoard them, we lose them. They are to be used “for the common good.” They are meant to build up the church, the body of Christ, and thus also the world, for I believe the world is the mystical body of Christ.

Last week I was struck by the last line of this chapter. I have read it before but never really thought about it. In this verse Paul tells his people to “strive for the greater gifts.” Paul did not regard all spiritual gifts as equal. For example, he was not a great fan

of speaking in tongues. He knew this phenomenon existed and had probably witnessed it. There is no indication that he either spoke in tongues or had the gift of interpreting tongues. Paul says that he would rather speak a few words that could be understood and that would enlighten rather than many words in a language that no one could understand.

But that's not exactly the point. The very last line of the 12th chapter says, "And I will show you a still more excellent way." What does Paul mean by this? What is the "more excellent way?" Last week I realized that this line is a lead-in to the 13th chapter, where Paul speaks about love. This was my little epiphany: Paul tells us that love is the "still more excellent way," a way of feeling, acting and being that is greater than all the other gifts.

The second experience that led to my choice of this theme is more mundane. This past fall I was invited to put on a marriage enrichment workshop at an area church. For several months I worked on the material for this weekend workshop. The workshop was unfortunately cancelled due to lack of interest. Apparently the people in that town are doing just fine in their marriages.

So here I am stuck with all the material I had prepared on why some marriages fail, how to save a marriage that is hurting, and how to make a good marriage better. I have considered offering it through our church or in conjunction with Pilgrim Church, but first I would like to unfold it as a series of sermons on love. For the next few weeks I invite us to think about the different ways that we experience love and express our love. I invite us to think about what the Christian therapist Gary Chapman has called the "languages of love."

Many people have written on the theme of communication in marriage. Much of their writings, however, have been directed toward conflict resolution. This is very important; in fact, it was going to be a part of my weekend workshop. We need to understand the ways in which our personalities, typologies, past experiences, and expectations shape our communications. However, I think we also need to think about how we express our love, how we show our love.

Much of what I am going to share with you the next few weeks is eloquently articulated in the Bible, specifically in the 13th chapter of Paul's letter. These ideas did not originate from the field of psychology; they have been part of our religious tradition

for thousands of years. All psychology has done is make them more understandable and accessible to us as we seek to help love come alive in our marriages, our friendships, our relationships with our children, our elderly parents, and with each other in our church.

Let's take a look at the first of these love languages, which we will call "Words of Affirmation." This is a very important dimension of love. When it is missing in a marriage, when we do not express the love we feel in words of affirmation, our partner may not experience the love that we actually feel. For some people, this is the most important dimension or expression of love. If they don't feel affirmed and encouraged by their partner, if they never hear a kind or supportive word, they will not feel loved.

Mark Twain once said, "I can live for two months on a good compliment." This suggests that he would have been quite happy with six compliments a year. I venture to suggest that your husband or wife and also your children probably need to hear a compliment, to hear some words of affirmation more often than this. Not to be personal, but your pastor also probably needs more than six compliments a year.

We know the power of the spoken word. Proverbs 18:21 tells us "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." Our words can build up or tear down. They can wound and they can heal. They can inflict pain or they can comfort.

In Proverbs 12:25 we read, "Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up." This is a powerful statement. Anxiety does indeed weigh down our heart. It darkens the world around us. It hovers over our head like a cloud. It robs us of the joy that is our proper heritage. A kind word, a loving word, a word of affirmation, a word of caring is often all that is needed to part the clouds of anxiety or depression and let the light shine through. We need to share this word more often than we do.

Verbal compliments are powerful communicators of love. They are experienced as affirming and validating. They build up the other person's self-esteem. Think about it. How often do you say something complimentary to your husband or wife, to your parents or your children? You might feel it inside. You might be deeply appreciative. But if these feelings are not articulated in words they will not be experienced as love. As a consequence, your partner's "love reservoir," the feeling that they are loved, could be close to empty. We should say these kinds of things when we feel them much more often than we do.

Let me give you an example. About thirty years ago I preached at a little church in South Attleboro. I still remember the church. It was about our size. I was only there one Sunday, but I will never forget that church. After the service, as the people filed past me at the door, each and every one of them shook my hand and said something positive about the service. They thanked me for leading them in worship. They told me that my sermon had touched them in some way or that it had made them think about the scripture lesson or their faith in a new way. This, of course, is one of the greatest compliments a parishioner can give me. Every single person said something.

I was stunned. Although I do suffer from low self-esteem, I don't generally think of myself as starved for compliments. I wondered if their pastor was such a bad preacher that I looked great in comparison. But she had a good reputation and she was obviously loved by her people. Then I wondered if she had taught or trained them to do this.

In that moment, while I was standing at the back door of the church, I realized something important. I realized that because of their words of affirmation, if I were to return to that church the next week I would be inspired to put even more into my sermon. I realized that their compliments would bring out the best in me. I compared that experience with the experience of being a supply preacher in other churches where people might say "Good morning" as they exited the sanctuary but there was no affirmation, not even any recognition that what I had worked so hard to prepare and deliver made any difference at all. That's not much of an incentive to work harder.

There are times when your partner, your children, yes, even your pastor needs to hear what could be called encouraging words. The word "encourage" means to "inspire courage." Encouraging words help us to overcome our insecurities. They help us to break free of that which holds us back from the realization of our true and full potential as a child of God. They help us to overcome fear.

Think about it in relation to your partner or your friend. Is there an area where this person needs a little encouragement? He might be starting a new job. She might be thinking about going back to school. He might be trying to work through a difficult and painful family conflict. This person might need to hear some words of encouragement. The words you share could make all the difference in the world.

By the way, a word of encouragement is not the same as trying to get your partner to do what you want him/her to do. It is not a form of manipulation. For example, if my wife encourages me to help out more around the house or just to be home more often than I am, this wouldn't really qualify as words of encouragement. It's what she already wants me to do. But if she encouraged me to embark upon another trekking pilgrimage to India, Nepal and Tibet, or to climb Mount Kilimanjaro -- that would really count!

Just as everyone has a primary spoken language, everyone has a primary love language. As we go through the various love languages you may be able to discover what yours is. Your primary love language may not be words of affirmation. Perhaps you didn't hear them often as a child. If you grew up hearing primarily critical and condemning words, you might not be open to receive words of affirmation from your partner and you may not even think of sharing them with the person whom you love. The inability to express words of affirmation or encouragement can be especially hurtful in your relationship with your children. They really need to hear these words.

The philosopher and psychologist William James once said, "possibly the deepest human need is the need to feel appreciated." If we appreciate what our husband or wife is contributing to the marriage, to the home, to the family, do we tell him/her? Do we let them know they are appreciated? I promise you: if you verbalize the appreciation you feel, if you show your appreciation in some way, the other person will actually feel loved.

If, for whatever reason, this isn't your primary love language, you may have to begin mechanically. Write down a list of compliments or affirmations that you could say to the other person. List the things that you like, admire, or respect. It might be your awareness of and your appreciation for all the things he/she does well. Once you make this list, you can add to it. Then you can select one positive trait every day and express it verbally to the other person. If you do this, I guarantee that it will have a positive impact not only on the other person but also on you. It is impossible to do this, to honestly share words of affirmation within increasing the love we feel in the relationship.

I think we know this is true. Most of us can think of a time when words had a profound impact on the way we felt about ourselves. We can probably think of a time when words of encouragement gave us the courage to undertake some venture that we would not otherwise have undertaken. We can probably also think of a time when a

criticism got inside us and prevented us from doing something we deep down wanted to do. Words can tear down, but they can also build up. They can wound, but they also can heal. They can hurt the other person, but they can also bring comfort and joy. The spoken word is important.

When I realize from my own experience how important words are in building me up or tearing me down, I have to assume that they are at least as important to my wife. They are probably even more important to my children because they don't have a lot of life experiences, a lot of personal successes from which they can draw self-esteem when the going gets rough. We need to say these things more often than we do to our partner, to our parents, to our friends, to our fellow parishioners, and also to our children, even if they are grown.

In this morning's epistle lesson Paul tells us that love is kind. He tells us that what we say and also how we say it is important. A spirit of kindness is especially important in the case of criticism, which does need to be honestly shared from time to time. How we say it, how we share it is important. We need to "speak the truth in love."

We are told to "fight fire with fire." I don't understand this saying. I don't think we should fight fire with fire, especially not the fire of conflict in our relationships. I think we should fight fire with water. The psalmist tells us "a soft answer turns away anger." Jesus tells us that we should respond to anger with kindness, that we should respond to hatred with love. Paul tells us that love doesn't keep a score of wrongs; it doesn't bring up past mistakes and failures. Love forgives. It doesn't mess up the clear water of today with the mud of yesterday. It is gracious.

In the week to come, let us be more gracious. Let us try, not only on Valentine's Day but also throughout the week, to express more words of affirmation, more words of encouragement, more compliments, more words of appreciation to the people we love. When we do this, when we utilize this very important love language, we will not only change the other person and change the relationship, we will also change for the better within ourselves. This is because we are choosing to articulate what Paul called the "greater gift," and we are choosing to walk the path of the "still more excellent way."

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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