

Loving to Live and Living to Love
Stewardship Sunday November 18, 2018
I Corinthians 12:31 and 13:1-13

Today we conclude our Stewardship emphasis for this year. Notice that I said that we conclude our stewardship “emphasis” not that we conclude our stewardship because stewardship is something that followers of Jesus should do constantly, not just for a few weeks in the fall each year. We should constantly strive to make the best use of the gifts that God gives us. We should constantly strive to serve like Jesus, to love like Jesus, and to live like Jesus.

In fact, they are such an important part of our stewardship that we have those very words hanging on the walls of the Commons Area, just behind the sanctuary, so that we can have that ongoing reminder. And our special focus this year- “All Blessings Flow...from God... to Us... to the World”- are words that we sing as part of our worship service almost every week when present our tithes and offerings. We acknowledge all of the ways that God blesses us in our lives and we try to give back as a way of saying “thank you” to God. We praise God for all the blessings that flow from him. And we strive to make the best use of those blessings that God gives to us.

That is really what Stewardship is about- making the best use of the gifts that God has given to us. One of the ways that we can do that is by following the example of the best gift that God has given to us, by following the example of our Lord and Savior, our Chief Elder, Jesus Christ. That’s why we talk so much about serving, loving, and living like Jesus. It is why we give ourselves- our time and our talents and even our treasure. When we truly believe that all the blessings that we have are gifts that God has given to us, then we MUST respond by giving back to God a portion of all of those blessings.

Stewardship is not about God's, or the church's, need to receive. It is about our need to give. It is about recognizing that the blessings of our lives, the blessings that God gives to us, are so overwhelming that we have no choice but to respond. And we respond by serving like Jesus served, loving like Jesus loved, and living like Jesus lived.

To be honest, I would imagine that some of you are probably getting a little bit tired of hearing those words- living, loving, serving like Jesus. But they are so important, so essential, that they must be repeated and shared. They go hand in hand with the "essentials" of the Moravian Church. When we so proudly quote our motto- "in essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, love" we need to remember that those essentials are God creating, redeeming, sustaining and our responding with faith, love, and hope.

Over the last three weeks, what we have been talking about in our stewardship emphasis are the essentials of our church, and the essentials of our faith. Serving like Jesus is essential, loving like Jesus is essential, living like Jesus is essential. Living, loving, serving=faith, love, hope.

We serve with hope- hope that our actions in Jesus name and our serving as Jesus served, will bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. That it will let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. We serve with hope to feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty, to clothe the naked and welcome the stranger, to care for the sick and visit the prisoners. We serve with patient hope as we strive to bring about a world that we do not yet see, a world where the kingdom of God has become the kingdom of this world.

Love is in the middle. While the familiar way to say it, as the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, is "faith, hope, and love"; our Moravian ancestors knew that love is the center of it all, so that is where they put it in naming the essentials and where we

place it in our very lives- right in the middle of all that we are and all that we do. Even writing them in a different order, Paul acknowledged love's centrality when he wrote *And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

Love is why all blessings flow from God to us and it is what God calls us to share with each other and with the world; more than faith and more than hope. Faith will one day become sight, and hope will end in fulfillment (Romans 8:24-25). Love will still remain, however, because God's love will not fall, fail, or falter. The love that God has for us is the love that he calls us to have for each other and for all.

In the New English Translation of I Corinthians, Paul's description of love begins like this: *And now I will show you a way that is beyond comparison.* This immediately follows a description of spiritual gifts and how we all have different spiritual gifts and all of our gifts (and therefore all of us) are necessary to the body of Christ, the church is one body with many parts and all are needed for the body to be healthy and functioning. But then there is something even more important, something even more necessary than all spiritual gifts, something that is more excellent, a way that is beyond comparison. And that way is the way of love.

The love that we read about this morning, from a passage that we so often associate with weddings and marriages, is not the romantic love of a husband and wife, or even the brotherly love we have for each other, but it is the self-giving love that God has for his beloved children, it is the self-sacrificing love that Jesus has for us. It is the love that Jesus calls us to give to each other.

There is nothing more important, more essential, than this love. Even if we have every other spiritual gift, even if we have the strongest faith and the most deeply abiding hope, but we don't have love, then none of the other matters, none of the other means anything. We can have the most correct, orthodox doctrine, we can follow the letter and

the spirit of the law, we can have the biggest and fanciest buildings, we can go to all the world and heal the sick and feed the poor, but if we do it without having love, than it just doesn't matter.

For we are called to be a community that practices love. I like that phrase "practices love" because loving like Jesus takes practice. It takes patience and kindness. It takes endurance and hope. It takes belief, belief in God and in Jesus, and belief in each other. We must believe in the fact that God brings us together as this community and that is a gift. We are each a gift that God gives to each other.

It kind of makes it easier to love each other if we look at one another as gifts from God. It makes it easier to overlook those things that annoy us, or disappoint us, or challenge us, when we look at those who are annoying, or disappointing, or challenging as being gifts that God gives to us. For Jesus loves us even when we are annoying and disappointing and challenging. And God gave us Jesus and Jesus gives us each other as he calls us to be his people, to be his body, to be his church.

So let us keep love at the center of all that we are and all that we do. And let us strive to be patient; to be kind; to not be envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Let us not insist on our own way; and not be irritable or resentful; we will not rejoice in wrongdoing, but let us rejoice in the truth. When we do, then we love like Jesus and his love flows to us and through us.

This brings us to faith. We live in faith. As the book of Hebrews tells us *faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. Faith and hope go together and they bookend love. And as with hope and certainly love, faith is best when it is shared, when it is lived out in community.

As the church, we faith a two-pronged faith: faith in God and faith in each other. The first part is easy, especially in comparison with the second. We can be sure that God will keep his promises to us. God has a history of having done so. In God's covenant with Noah, God promised to never again destroy the world with a flood. In God's promise to Moses and the Hebrew people, he led them out of slavery and into freedom. In God's promise to all of his children, he kept it by sending his son into the world to free us from our sins. We can live with faith in God because God has shown us that he keeps his promises to his people, we can live with faith in God because God continually shows us that he keeps his promises to us. Our watchword for the week says it well- *Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for God who has promised is faithful.*

But living with faith in each other, living like Jesus, is much more difficult. We continually let each other down. We continually disappoint one another. We even betray each other. But despite that, we can't lose faith with each other and we can't break fellowship with each other. Jesus knew that living as a community was hard- the disciples let him down, when Peter denied even knowing him. They disappointed him, remember how James and John asked to sit at his right and left hand in his glory. And Judas betrayed him and turned him over to those who would crucify him.

Yet Jesus still had faith in his friends. He didn't turn away from them or break fellowship with them. And his faith was ultimately rewarded, his faith became sight. Those same disciples who disappointed him and let him down were the same disciples who would go on to tell the world about him, about who he was and who he is and who he wants them to be. They were the same disciples that began his church and shared his love to the very ends of the earth. Except for Judas, who ended his life before Jesus' faith in him could be seen.

Jesus' faith was so strong, his hope was unwavering, not because he was divine, not because he was the son of God and he knew things that we couldn't know, but because his love was so strong. His love for his friends, for his followers, was at the center of who he was and what he did. Jesus lived to love, he lived to serve, he lived to give.

As his followers let us do the same. Let us put love in the center of our lives and our church as we love like Jesus. Let us serve together with an unwavering hope and let us live together with an unbreakable faith. In his church is where it all comes together. In this community is where it all happens.

As you prepare to complete your Stewardship Pledge, if you haven't done so already, please take a moment and think about all of the ways that you have been able to experience the love of Jesus at New Philadelphia, think about all of the ways that you have been able to love LIKE Jesus here. Think about all of the ways you have felt the hope that Jesus brings through others as they have served like Jesus here at New Philadelphia, and all of the ways that you have brought hope to others through your service at New Philadelphia. And think about all of the ways that your faith has been seen and shared as together we live like Jesus here at New Philadelphia.

As we live together, as we love together, and as we serve together, may God's blessings continue to flow to us... and through us to the world.

Let us pray...