Sunday, January 28, 2001
CONQUERING RESENTMENT
I Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

In addition to the 23rd Psalm, I Corinthians, chapter 13, verses 1 through 13, may be the most often quoted passage from the Bible. It begins, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” I’ve read this beautiful passage on love so many times in marriage ceremonies that I know it from memory. It is also frequently read at funeral services, and rightly so.

In spite of its popularity, few people know the context of these familiar words. Why did the Apostle Paul write these words about love to the church in Corinth? Briefly, here’s what happened. Paul had organized a new congregation of “Followers of the Way” in Corinth. That’s what early believers in Christ were called. After he left Corinth to organize more congregations in other places, word came to him about some serious conflicts within the church in Corinth. Additionally, someone from that church had written to Paul, raising a series of questions. What we now call First Corinthians in the New Testament is Paul’s letter to that church, in which he does his best to answer their questions, correct their errors, and provide guidance in solving their problems.

One of their biggest disagreements was over “spiritual gifts.” Some of the members were claiming that they were more deeply spiritual than others because they could speak in “tongues.” In a worship service, they would be so filled with God’s Spirit that in their ecstasy, strange, unusual, and wonderful sounds would come from their vocal cords. This “spiritual gift,” they said, proved that they were superior to others in spiritual matters. It was a sign, they claimed, that God’s power was more active in their lives than in the lives of those who did not speak in tongues.

There were other people in the congregation who said they had spiritual gifts of another kind, which made them superior. Some declared that they had the spiritual gift of prophecy, which proved they were exceptional in sacred matters. Still, others bragged that God had a preference for them because they were more generous givers, and yet another group claimed God favored them because they had a stronger faith. It had become a major church fight. What did Paul do?

First of all, Paul reminded these Corinthians that there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. God gives each one of us different gifts, and there is no hierarchy. He tells them and us that God does not compare us one with another, but we are given different gifts for the common good, and each gift is equally important. He used the human body as an analogy: can an ear say it is more important than an eye, or a hand say it is more important than a foot? If your whole body were an eye, how would you be able to hear?

He then continues by reminding them — and you and me — that no matter what your spiritual gift is or how many you have, if you do not have love, it’s all wasted and of no use. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic power, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”

Then he continues by describing the attributes of the kind of love he is talking about. It's more than romantic love. It's more than brotherly or sisterly love. This kind of love is patient; it is kind; it is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; it is not irritable or resentful.

It is not resentful! It is the issue of conquering resentment that this sermon intends to deal with specifically. What is resentment, and what are some of its causes?

One person describes resentment this way: "Resentment is yesterday's irritation scratched into the sensitive membranes of our memory. It is yesterday's hurt grown up into today's indignation. Planted and tended in our memory, the thorn that first pricked us now stabs away at our peace. Memories of minor hurts become major resentments."

Minor irritations can lead to resentment, which can grow if left unchecked. Someone is rude to you, and you are rude in return. A dead car battery on a cold morning when you are in a hurry; a misunderstanding with a relative or friend; a set of lost keys — all little things, yet aggravating.

There are larger problems that can lead to resentment. A close friend or relative is diagnosed with cancer. You lose your job. Someone where you work is promoted, and you are certain you deserved it more but didn't get it. You look around and wonder why other people do not have the problems you have, and the seed of resentment begins to grow.

One primary cause of resentment is the incessant temptation to always compare yourself to others. That's what the Corinthians were doing. You think, "How come she gets all the breaks, and I get none?" You can even come to resent God's love and forgiveness toward others. You wonder, "Why is it that God seems to love him more than me?" You resent the idea when you are told that God loves the very people you think are unworthy of God's love — people you dislike or even hate.

When Jesus returned to his hometown synagogue and preached a sermon on the text from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news," the hometown folks were at first impressed. But as he began to spell out the implications of Isaiah's words, they became angry and resentful.

Their resentment was caused by an issue far more serious than the fact that here was a familiar hometown individual preaching to them. It was more than jealousy or envy. They had heard that he had been carrying on a ministry in Capernaum, which had a large non-Jewish population. Jesus knew their resentment over that. And then, to make matters worse, he reminded them of some Old Testament stories that they didn't want to hear. He told them about Elijah and Elisha, two of the greatest Old Testament prophets, who took God's grace to non-Jews, and God blessed them in their ministry.

These two stories were in their scriptures and well-known to them, but stories they would rather forget. Anger and resentment are the last defenses when you are made to face the truth of your own tradition, which calls into question your present-day attitudes and actions. Being reminded of what you already know but would like to forget is painfully difficult, especially when it judges your present-day behavior.

So it is that a major cause of resentment is the fact that we are offended by God's grace to those who do not have our approval. That's what the story of Jonah in the Old Testament is all about. Jonah said to God, "The reason I did not want to preach to the people of Nineveh is that

I know you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." (Jonah 4:2) Jonah resented God's love, grace, and forgiveness toward people he did not think deserved them.

One of the mysteries surrounding resentment is, why do we hang on to it? What kind of pleasure can we obtain from it? What kind of reward is there for us? What are its benefits?

You might think you get a reward from hanging on to it because resentment makes you feel superior to the person you resent. It also gives you an excuse for indulging in exquisite plots for revenge. You savor the possibility of getting even.

At the same time, you also hate the resentment in yourself because you are miserable in it. It takes a lot of energy. It depresses you, robs you of gratitude, and spills over into other relationships. Hanging on to resentment blocks love. That's the worst part of all. Love and resentment are always in conflict.

That's why the Apostle Paul wrote, "Love is not irritable or resentful." Resentment blocks love because it views the person toward whom you are resentful through a lens clouded with anger. The people who were resentful toward Jesus that day in his hometown synagogue were angry with him and therefore could not see him clearly for what he was.

What then are some positive ways for conquering your resentment? Ideally, of course, the way to handle resentment is to prevent it from taking place. But that's easier said than done. It helps to remember that having some bad days is inescapable. The human capacity for pain, suffering, and mistakes goes all the way back to our creation. To love is to be open to hurt. To care is to be open to disappointment and rejection. Our Christian faith affirms that to truly live and love is to be open, accessible, and vulnerable, and that leaves you open to resentment.

One way to keep resentment from growing is to remember there is no scarcity in love. Because God loves people you do not think deserve God's love does not mean that God loves you any less. It does not mean that God has taken away some love from you to give it to someone else. God's love has no limits. There is always a surplus.

The same can be true of your love for others. Let me be personal for a moment. As some of you know, I grew up in a family of seven children. One of the things each one of us had to learn was that our parents had more than enough love for all of us. Because my mother one day showed special attention and love to one of my siblings did not mean that she was taking some love away from me in order to give it to someone else.

Genuine love flows from abundance, not scarcity. The more you love, the more love you have to give.

In conquering resentment, it also helps to remember that you gain nothing from it. There is no payoff for you, only loss. Why would you want to keep exhibiting a behavior that does you harm? What did Jonah gain from being resentful about the fact that God loved the people of Nineveh as much as the people of his own kind? What did the people in Jesus' hometown gain from being resentful over the fact that he had carried God's love to the people of Capernaum?

In addition, in conquering resentment, it helps if you deal with it openly and directly. Jesus said, "If you are bringing your gift to the altar and have something against another human being, leave your offering there before the altar and go be reconciled with that person first."

The longer you suppress your resentment, the more it turns sour and the more damage it does.

Remember what Paul had to say in the letter to the people in Corinth: “Love can drive out the demon of remembered hurt and pain.” The power of God’s love working in you can bring you to a new beginning. Love lets the hurtful past die. It moves you to a new beginning without worrying about settling the past. It forgives the past. This does not mean that love clears up all misunderstandings. What happens is, when love is operating in us, the details of the past which have hurt us become irrelevant. Only a new beginning matters. Accounts may go unsettled; differences remain unresolved; ledgers stay unbalanced. That’s because love does not require getting even. That’s the big difference.

Conflicts between people’s memories of how things happened do not have to be cleared up — they are left in the past. They become unimportant. You can let them go. Only the present and the future matter. Love’s power relieves you from being fussy historians. Genuine love prefers to forget all about the loose ends of right and wrong in the past.

Forgiveness takes over and pushes you to a new start.

Letting go of the past and beginning here and now to move again toward a reconciled life is one of the hardest things any human being is ever asked to do. But love has the power to do just that.

God’s love is our model. It keeps flowing to you, though you have offended over and over again. It is God’s love that makes it possible for you to love unconditionally. You are enabled by a love that keeps no score. The score-keeping you do in human relationships can be your stumbling block in conquering resentment. God is not interested in your losses and wins with other people.

God’s love is not resentful — ever. So you no longer have any need to savor those past hurts, to collect and guard them. Let them go. You have no need to nourish resentment. It only causes more trouble. And who needs that? Amen.