

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Earl Fritz at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 29, 2012, Pentecost 10.

“The Chi Rho of Love”

John 3:16

Part I of VI in the sermon series “Shining God’s Light on Hidden Christian Virtues”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The Gospel for the day is the familiar story of the feeding of the five thousand. But as we hear this, we need to look past a couple of things. This is not about how powerful Jesus is in his miracles. This is not about food. This is about compassion. He had compassion, care, love for the crowd. "How can I help them, as they're here." The crowd didn't take things in the right way. They set out to make him king, and that is when he fled (from the Gospel according to the sixth chapter of St. John).

After this, Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberius. The large crowd kept following him because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. The Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Phillip, "Where are they going to get bread for all these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Phillip answered him, "Six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to have a little."

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There's a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said to him, "Make the people sit down."

Now there was a great deal of grass in the place, so they sat down, about 5,000 in all. Then Jesus took the loaves and when he had given thanks, he had them distributed to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who has come into the world." When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat and started across the sea to Capernaum. It got dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about 3 or 4 miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea, and coming near the boat! And they were terrified, but he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

Let us pray: Open our hearts and our minds in this hour, O Lord that we may hear and believe your word as it is read and spoken. Amen.

You have already received a little bit of an introduction to the sermon series that we begin today, with the explanation that Mark has given to the window.

A little bit more about windows. I've done a history of stained glass windows, and I do stained glass, and there's so much to know. The art of stained glass windows combines the skill that we have as God's people in creating a picture and in creating the glass, and putting this into a frame, a wood work, or whatever, and then letting the light come through it. As I explained in the July newsletter front page, stained glass windows without light are nothing. It is light that gives them life.

John O'Donahue, the Scottish artist, philosopher and statesman, has said that "light is the life of the world," and how true that is. Without light, there is no life. And the light is that which God has given you. God gives us the light of the sun to shine on our stained glass windows and then, in partnership with God, we create the windows, he furnishes the light and the message comes forth beautifully and clearly! I like that one of the stained glass art studios puts as a subtitle on its letterhead, "When light learns to speak." When light learns to speak! I like that, because that's what it does; it speaks to us.

Pastor Ahrens was aware of that huge Rose Window in the back of the church, and as an incidental bit, I must add that we have all found out that life is about tradeoffs. When you want to go after something else, you have to sometimes trade off something to get it. And I'm sure that's what this congregation did forty-some years ago, or whenever it was, when they put in the organ in the gallery. It was a tradeoff. We'll make the tradeoff, because we need music. There is no way to get the kind of music we want but to put it in front of the stained glass window. So we're trading off something we don't look at enough, for something we will hear every Sunday.

Pastor Ahrens decided we need to get to the message of that lovely window, and so he came up with the idea of doing this series of six sermons on the little medallions. In that window around the outside, there are six small circles called "window medallions" and each one has a symbol in them, and each one illustrates something in the Bible, a virtue in the Bible. This is the first of those Sundays emphasizing those medallions in the window.

The medallion we emphasize today is the symbol of Christ himself, who first of all should be the one to whom we look. The symbol of Christ and what he has done for the world, and what God did for the world through that symbol of Christ. There is a verse then that we tie to it, John 3:16. And if you don't know it, you've missed out on something, Sunday school, or somewhere, because this is everything. Martin Luther said that John 3:16 is the whole of the New Testament of the Bible in one verse. And indeed, it is. It says it all.

It proceeds to answer that question that we could ask, that we ask again and again: "Why?" Why did God do this, anyway? He could have done something else. Martin Luther once said, "If I were the Lord God and would look at the world, (the world in Luther's day) and see how vile people are, and how so disobedient they are, I would crush the world into pieces." And I think my emotions might have done the same, if I had been God. But no, God did not determine to lose the world; he determined to save it, and that's the story of the family of Noah, Noah and the Ark.

It came that close, but he decided to save the world through one family, and then go on and teach us in this, the greatest verse of all, why he did it. God did it because he loves us. This is the supreme act of God, that rises above all else, goes beyond all reasoning and common sense, that a father should sacrifice his son on a cross to save such people like Luther described; that a father should do that, should go that far.

William Barclay, a famous English theologian, said, "Calvary is not the story simply of pain and suffering on the part of Jesus." Barclay has said "sin is breaking the heart of God!" And there was suffering and pain and sorrow in heaven on Good Friday, as God looked down and saw his son being crucified. The heart of God was aching that day. This is the supreme act of God, to give his life for his people. It's all there.

What's ironic and a little bit strange, is that God gives the same kind of feeling to we human beings because it is known that

human beings will indeed sacrifice their own lives for others. And that's the greatest love, to lay down one's life for a friend.

This happens again and again. It takes place in the armies so often that our government has given a medal to those who so do; the Congressional Medal of Honor is given in honor of those military men who sacrifice their own lives in order to save others. A hand grenade falls into a trench full of troops, a certain death for anyone near. But one of the soldiers falls on the grenade, knowing that it will be absolute death for him, and he subdues the force of the grenade with his own body. Or another soldier may run out into an open field, into the face of enemy fire to distract the enemy while some others may escape, knowing he will face certain death.

Sacrificial love is possible for all of us. And I learned a story of sacrificial love last Sunday. Last Sunday I preached in a Lutheran church in Circleville. The pastor is in the hospital at OSU recovering. He is recovering from a lung transplant. Fifty-four years old, a lung had failed, and he needed a new one. As we know, we have two lungs, and we can live on one. If we lose one, the other one expands and takes care of the extra need.

They searched high and low among his relatives for a match, there has to be a match for a lung transplant. They couldn't find one, so they asked was anyone in the congregation willing. No one in the congregation who matched came forward, but there was a woman in the congregation who had a daughter living in Reynoldsburg. The pastor was a complete and total stranger to her. But she came forward and offered to be a match. She turned out to be a match. She said, "I will give my lung in love to this man that this church may continue to have a strong pastor." It's happening now. We do this. This is the supreme act of love that even we as people can have.

But as I talk about love, I want to move to another dimension. I've talked about the love of God. Now what about practicing that love among us as his people? And I turn now to another Bible text, 1 Corinthians: 13. What is the subject of 1 Corinthians: 13? You know it; it is love.

Now this is may be a kind of a shock to you, but I'm going to say I don't believe one bit that the Apostle Paul had in mind weddings when he wrote the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, but that's when you hear it, at weddings, right? What's a little bit strange about it is that the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians talks more about what love is not, rather than what love is! It talks about what love is not: love is not about being rich and giving all your money to the poor; it's not about being intelligent and helping others to have wisdom; it's not about being a great preacher in the church; it's not about all these things. It's not about being rude and unforgiving. It's about being good and truthful and kind. Those three things are the emphasis of 1 Corinthians 13. Being kind and good to one another; that's fitting, of course, for marriage. And that love is everlasting; this is what marriage should be, continuous love to the end of our days.

Now one of the ways of discovering more meaning for a word is to look at the other side of it. Flip the coin and what's the other side of love? If I were to ask you, what is the opposite of love, you would say hate. You're wrong! Hate is not the opposite of love! And I have a Bible parable to prove that. Let's talk about the Good Samaritan. Someone asked Jesus, you know, how do I love my neighbor, and he came out with the Good Samaritan story.

The Good Samaritan begins with a traveler who has fallen among thieves and is at the side of the road, mugged, robbed, beaten up, to the point of dying. A Levite comes by. Now the traveler was a Jew, and there is a little bit of a difference there between a Jew and a Levite. So a Levite comes by and looks around. "This is a dangerous road", he said to himself, and it was. Sometimes the thieves will even set up decoys to try and catch people. He thought, "If I stop to help this poor man, they might come out of the bushes and rob me! I can't take that risk." And he walked on by.

Then the priest came along, and the priest looked at the man, and he thought, "I'm on my way to a suburban temple in Jerusalem, and the rules say that if I touch someone who is dead (they knew about catching diseases, even in those days!) I can't

serve in the temple for seven days! I'll be unclean. I won't be able to conduct the services." So the priest goes on by, saying, "I can't take the risk."

Now neither the Levite nor the priest hated this person. They were selfish. They were thinking of themselves and themselves only. Selfishness. It's at the heart of sin. It's a sin we all struggle with day in and day out, don't we? It was the first sin in the Bible. It was the sin of Eve, who when told she could become as smart as God, gave in, picked the fruit. She was thinking of herself, wasn't she?

In the Bible, we move on to the Israelites in the desert, where they were dependent on God. They wanted more things, and they weren't sure God was going to deliver, and so, thinking of themselves, they thought, "We're going to make ourselves some gold idols, and we'll worship idols." They turned their back on God, thinking of themselves and their own needs, and began to worship idols.

Let's jump to the New Testament. Why did Peter deny Christ three times? To save his own skin, didn't he? Because he figured, they'll go after me. Why did the disciples all desert Jesus when he was on the cross? They were thinking to themselves, "Why keep going along with this loser? He's a loser; let's leave him." They deserted him. Selfishness.

It's there. Selfishness keeps us from doing what we ought to do. Selfishness is the fog that keeps us from seeing other people's needs. Selfishness is the temptation to be greedy. Selfishness is the roadblock that keeps us from going the second mile, which Jesus talks about. Selfishness is the flaw in our thinking that has us begin to think, "These people aren't worthy of my charity."

I can bring this to reality by talking about something we are known for in this church. Bethlehem on Broad Street. Have you attended one of these days? Bethlehem on Broad Street. The church is filled with all these ragged people, smelly people who haven't had a shower in weeks, their dogs along with them, noisy,

loud, ugly. You want to look at it and say, "Is it really worth it? Tomorrow, they won't remember what we did for them today. They won't thank us as we leave like they ought to. Why do it?" Why keep on doing it?

I turn to Mother Theresa. We've all heard of Mother Theresa. She wrote about this. Here are four things that she said, and I like this. "If you are kind to people and they accuse you of selfish motives, be kind anyway. People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered. Forgive them anyway. If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you. Be honest and frank anyway. The good news you do today, people will forget tomorrow. Be good anyway." Be good anyway; don't put conditions on it, but because Jesus would have done the same.

Albert Sweitzer, that famous German theologian, historian, professor, musician, could have taught in any seminary in Europe; he could have taught in any college in Europe; he could have served any church in Europe with his skill at the organ. But what did Albert Sweitzer do? He went to Lambarene in Africa and founded that mission to do the Lord's work. And Albert Sweitzer says fairly that, "I'll know I'll patch up these people and I'll heal them, and they'll go out and do the same things and they'll be back again in another month, but I'm going to keep on doing this anyway." That's why we do it.

One thing, by the way, that Chapter 13 of First Corinthians doesn't talk about is emotions. But emotions are not love; that's where we make a mistake. And there is no word in the English language that is used in so many different ways other than love. We love everything from pizza to dogs, to people, to cars, to dresses, to houses, to homes; we love all these things. We really misuse the word.

Love is not emotion; love is action. Action, action. That's what First Corinthians is about. That's what the love that Jesus teaches us is about. It's about action, doing something, doing what we are supposed to do in following Jesus. And love is the greatest thing of all, and that's the last verse of First Corinthians. And now abides

faith and hope (no, they're not the greatest) and love, but love is the greatest of all. It is. And that's what Jesus would do; and that's what we're to do as his followers.

Let us pray.

Give us the strength, O God, and the will to carry on with your work in the world. And we thank you that we know you. Amen.

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