“Love, Grace, and Mercy”
Dr Robert Bardeen
Ward Parkway Presbyterian
June 30, 2019

For my last sermon with you, I have three words for us to consider: love, grace, and mercy.

Last week at Montreat Conference Center, one of the teachers asked us to write our core purpose and share it in a small group the next day. Then we discussed what Christian words were used the most. Most of the core purposes used the word love.

I could have selected other Christian words like hope, joy, or faith, but these three seem to summarize my views about life as a Christian.

Love

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 NIV
1 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.

Notice the threefold pattern of Paul’s contentions. He first states the ability or action that we might think is greater than love. Second, he uses the same phrase each time - “but do not have love.” And third, he concludes with the consequences.

Speaking is the first ability that we might think is okay without love, but instead, whether it is strong or angelic, it only provides repetitive noise and irritating discord.

2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

The list is promising at first glance: insight about the future, a deep awareness of what is not commonly understood, comprehension of all wisdom, and spirituality that can accomplish great things. It sounds great, maybe even the greatest, but if thought, even faith, is done without love, it is nothing.

The word “nothing” is harsh. It’s like we line up all of the scholars against a wall, and tell them that their abilities, their insights, their intellect, and their depth of spiritual wisdom is useless without love. Many of them would laugh and ridicule such a view. “My work stands on its own merit,” they might say, but they will be wrong. Love is at the core of their existence, and their denial will shade and color their lifelong work. Love defines all of life - even work of the mind.
If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Paul adds one more dimension to the list of abilities that are worthless unless there is love. It’s self sacrifice by giving away all possessions or by giving away our body. Surely, some might say, Paul has stepped over the line. Self sacrifice has to be seen as love in itself, but it is not.

This extreme example helps us understand the extent of Paul’s view of love. Anything done by thought or deed without love is worthless and useless.

A week ago, we were in North Carolina for a conference at Montreat. The theme was music and worship. Most of us had choir rehearsal twice a day, and then we sang at several of the six worship services and then during the last night. Singing in a 500 voice choir is remarkable.

All week long we worked on an anthem arranged by Tom Trenney called “For Everyone Born, A Place at the Table.” It was published as a hymn ten years ago. It became emotional every time we rehearsed the anthem. It’s the words. This anthem is filled with love. I’m going to read it, and add a few comments.

For everyone born, a place at the table
For everyone born, clean water and bread
A shelter, a space, a safe place for growing
For everyone born, a star over head

Refrain:
And God will delight when we are creators of justice
And joy, compassion and peace
Yes, God will delight when we are creators of justice
Justice and joy

For woman and man, a place at the table
Revising the roles, deciding to share
With wisdom and grace, dividing the power
For woman and man, a system that’s fair

For young and for old, a place at the table
A voice to be heard, a part in the song
The hands of a child in hands that are wrinkled
For young and for old, the right to belong

For everyone born, a place at the table
To live without fear, and simply to be
To work, to speak out, to witness and worship  
For everyone born, the right to be free  

**Grace**  
You already know about grace. It’s God’s unmerited favor. It’s a gift from God.  

Grace is amazing. Grace is all we need. Grace was shown on the cross. Jesus is the ultimate expression of God’s grace.  

The second passage I selected tells us how grace is sufficient.  

**2 Corinthians 12:7b-10 NIV**  
7b Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.  

I want you to notice some things about this passage.  

**First,** Paul was given the thorn in the flesh. I count three reasons why he received the thorn.  

- He received the thorn to keep him from being conceited because of the revelations and insights he received from the Lord. In the previous verses, he lists numerous great moments of paradise. He heard inexpressible things from God.  
- He received the thorn as a messenger from Satan. He knew the powers of darkness were close by when the thorn emerged in his life.  
- He received the thorn as a means of torment. The thorn was not a gift of love or a gift of grace or a gift of mercy. It was a gift of reality.  

**Second,** Paul asked the Lord to take it away **three** times. Maybe he understates the number of times he asked the Lord about it. I know for me I have pleaded with the Lord about 20 times. All of us know about thorns and prayers about them and the feeling of helplessness. All of us know about being frustrated. All of us know about limitations and problems and things we want to stop or go away. All of us know about pleading with God.  

**Third,** God said to Paul, better yet, **God taught Paul** that grace will have to be sufficient. By that statement, I conclude that Paul had to live with the thorn in his flesh. Maybe the Corinthians
knew what it was, and maybe they didn’t. It could have been something physical that showed on the outside, or it could have been something mental that didn’t show on the outside.

Fourth, the gift of grace enabled Paul to get a perspective on weakness. “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Mercy

Matthew 18:21-22 NIV
21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” 22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Right after these two verses, Jesus tells Peter the parable of the unmerciful servant. A quick review reveals a servant who does not show mercy to those who helped him while he expects mercy from his master. The concluding verses (32-35) provide the punch line that opens the door for us to understand verses 21-22. 32

“Well then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35 “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Peter thought he was being generous by offering to show mercy seven times. It does sound like plenty. I can’t remember a time that I have been called upon to forgive a brother or sister seven times.

The reply by Jesus moves our perspective to an endless amount of mercy. There’s a textual variant on verse twenty two. Some manuscripts have seventy-seven times, and other manuscripts have seven times seventy, or 490 times. Both mean the same: we need to give mercy an endless amount of times. We need to be like God. We need to follow the way God gives mercy - again and again and again.

A friend of mine traveled America to talk with youth and young adults about the church, and discover why most of them are no longer attending church. He was writing a book. He gathered them into focus groups of 12 apiece and just listened. While in Des Moines, he met a young couple who were members a small Presbyterian church in the area. My friend asked them why, and he heard this story.
After graduate school in the east coast, both were offered jobs in Des Moines, he as an engineer and she as a financial advisor. During the first few months, they visited around without deciding about a church. They attended one Presbyterian church twice. The people were friendly, but not many were in church on Sundays, and most of them had grey hair.

After her routine breast cancer check up, she received a call from her doctor for another immediate visit. The couple was stunned to hear she had cancer. Surgery was needed. Soon she checked into the hospital, and when they asked for her religious affiliation, she said Presbyterian. A chaplain came to her room before surgery, and asked if there was a specific church. They looked at each other and said the church they had visited twice. The chaplain immediately informed the pastor who came by several times during surgery and afterwards.

It was rough, but she finally went home for recovery. She told her husband she was tired and planned to rest of the day. He went to work to check on a few things and planned to return at 5pm to fix dinner for them. At 3pm, there was a knock at the door. She got out of bed to answer the door, and a kind lady was there holding some things in her hands.

“Hello, can I help you?”

“Yes, hello. I’m Margaret from the church, and I have dinner for you. Can I come in?”

“Yes. Thank-you. How much does it cost?”

“Oh, there is no charge. I have a chicken casserole, salad, green beans, and a little pie for you and your husband. I can put it in the kitchen.” The lady walked to the kitchen and noticed things were a little messy here and there. “Would you like some company?”

“Yes. I’ve been resting for hours, and it would be nice to talk for a while.” After sharing for about 45 minutes, the lady suggested that she could clean up the kitchen, dining room, and living room while she rested some more. The young woman agreed and went to the bedroom. At 5pm, her husband came home. The lady had set the table and put the meal in the oven for warming.

On the next day at 11am, she received another visitor from the church. A quite shy fellow in his 70s was holding a meal for them. He looked uncomfortable, but smiled when she greeted him. “Yes, I’m from the church.” He put the food in the kitchen and told her about the instructions for reheating. “When I entered, I noticed your screen door needs a little work. I’m a retired hardware salesman, and I can get my tools from my car and fix that real fast.” She nodded yes and smiled at the extend of love from their church that they visited only twice.

The visits and food delivery lasted for two months. Their friends from work wanted to come over to see how she was doing, and they invited them over for a meal. “We have plenty of food.
There’s no need to bring anything.” They asked where they got all of the food, and they witnessed about the love from their church.

When she recovered her strength, they told the pastor they wanted to join the church, and get on the list for food delivery.

They wanted to give what was given to them.

You see, love, grace, and mercy is not given to be possessed, but to be given away. It’s the good news of the gospel. All of the good gifts we receive from God can be given to others in need.

All of us need love. All of us need grace. All of us need mercy.

Let us pray.