

Sermon: More Than a Motto
Text: I Corinthians 13
Date: August 27, 2017
Context: WWPC
Welcome Students Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

The greatest of these is love.

I Corinthians 13:13

On Wednesday of this week, several hundred freshly arrived students, along with their parents, gathered right here in this Chapel to be welcomed to Warren Wilson by President Morton and the other members of her Cabinet -- the Deans and Vice Presidents of the college.

If you were here that day, and it appears that quite a few of you were, then you might think that I owe the title of this sermon to Dr. Morton.

Among her other comments, Lynn observed that after six weeks on the job, her personal motto for Warren Wilson College is "We're all in!"

I believe she intended the motto to convey to this class of new arrivals that the college has their backs.

That everyone from the president to the deans and VP's to the faculty and the staff - everyone who works at the college comprises a community that is dedicated not just to the students' education, but to their well-being and to their development as human beings.

And that, together, all of these people are prepared to make the kinds of investments that will enable the students to go out into the world when they leave this place, and change it for the better.

As you can see, I myself was inspired by that motto. In part because it's also a pretty accurate description of what we're about as a faith community. Whatever your age, or your station in life, whatever opportunities that greet you, whatever challenges that befall you, we, too, are all in.

Whether faith comes as naturally to you as breathing, or whether you've never even been sure there is a God, well, together, we've got your back.

Whether it feels like your future is bright and stretching out before you like a golden dream, or whether it feels like you've just been hit by your own personal hurricane and your life is now in ruins, we've got your back.

Whether your heart has been shattered by a break up, or your leg has been shattered in a car crash, together, we've got your back.

When you walk through those doors, we'll offer you a warm welcome, or a warm hug. When times are tough, we'll offer you chocolate pie and Kleenex to comfort you.

And when everything falls apart, we'll bring mops and buckets and brooms and tools to clean up the mess and help put things back together again. Because that's who we are, and that's how we roll around here.

So it was tempting to reframe this entire sermon around Lynn's wonderful phrase. But the truth is that I was already planning to preach about a motto of my own. Or I should say, a motto of our own.

Because we do have one of our own here at the Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church. It's painted on the banner hanging over our front doors that greeted you on the way in this morning. And it's stitched onto the banner hanging on this beautiful rock wall behind me.

Love Above All

This motto comes to us on good authority.

They will know you are my disciples, Jesus says, if you have love for one another.

We take Jesus at his word on this point. Which is why we believe that love is indeed above all. We prize it above doctrine, and we esteem it above belief in ancient creeds, or even modern ones for that matter -- however good and important and useful these resources may be.

And for reasons I'll come back to in a moment, we even believe love is above faith itself.

So for us, Love Above All is more than a motto. It's the foundation of our life together as Christian community, and it lies at the heart of our practice as congregation.

And there is no better text in all of scripture to showcase what this love looks like than First Corinthians 13.

Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

This is only the introduction to Paul's famous commentary on the nature of love. To be honest, the full picture he paints of what love looks like is rather idealized. It's one that all of us normal, imperfect human beings fall short of on the regular.

But it's worth getting this full litany tattooed on our hearts, because when it comes to Christian practice, if you get this right, you get everything right.

Now, that said, it's also worth remembering that love is not the only spiritual virtue named in this passage. It's just one of three such virtues, a kind of holy trinity that also includes faith and hope. Granted love is the greatest of these virtues -- it stands above the others, including faith -- but it's not the only one.

I say this because right now, at this particular moment in American history, and perhaps at this particular moment in our lives as individuals, this moment in our lives as Americans, faith and hope are pretty important too.

On Monday, many of us watched as a relatively small celestial object that has no light of its own, gradually slid in front of the brightest object in the sky, our very own local star. By slow and steady degrees, the air cooled off as the enormous quantity of radiant light that ordinarily heats the earth slowly got blocked out.

As if God were turning a celestial rheostat, the bright light of mid-day gradually faded into something that looked and felt more like the light of evening, except it was not the luminous and golden light of evening we're all accustomed to.

Instead the light was greenish and eerie, and frankly it was a little spooky.

And then, for the millions of people who, by accident or intention, found themselves in the so-called path of totality, the light finally shrank to a tiny orange sliver, until the sun simply vanished.

Granted, the view in the sky above was jaw-dropping and awe-inspiring and I never forget it. But down here where we all live, it was dark and eerie at 2:34 in the afternoon. It was colder than it should have been at that time of day, at this time of year, the tail end of summer.

In that moment, the world not only felt changed. It felt wrong.

I had great sympathy for what it must have been like for pre-scientific people to experience an event like this. How terrifying it must have been for them to live through something they couldn't understand or explain, something over which they had no power, something that made it feel like normal life had come unhinged, and that it might end altogether.

Which may be a little like how you're feeling right now. Some of you have recently said good-bye to your parents, and you've now been to your first few college classes.

Perhaps most of you students are doubtless thrilled by this turn of events. You've taken to your new life, and your new freedom, like a rocket to a launching pad. Bang! You're off, blasting toward your future.

But maybe for a few of you, the college experience so far has felt more like something over which you have no control. Maybe the world around you feels a little spooky.

Maybe that's true of the world inside you, too--dark and a little unsettling. And if you're perfectly honest, maybe you have no idea how you're going to get through these next four years.

If that's true for you, take heart. You're not alone. Many of us, perhaps most of us, maybe even all of us, aren't sure how we're going to get through these next for years, either.

It feels like the world at hand, the world we know and love, the world whose rhythms we trust and depend on, this world suddenly feels not only changed. It feels wrong.

We watch as white nationalists march through the streets of America, bearing torches, waving literal Nazi flags and chanting literal Nazi chants, and it feels like a kind of darkness has fallen.

We watch as the highest elected official in the United States -- and, yes, it is the preacher's job to say this -- repeatedly takes the wrong side of history, endorsing the white supremacists, pardoning an unrepentant, law-breaking, grotesquely racist judge, and it feels like life as we've always known it has come unhinged.

This is not the America we know, not the American we love and believe in. Every day it feels darker out there than it should. Every day relations between neighbors grow just a little bit cooler.

And as the darkness deepens our streets feel less safe than they should feel, more hostile and violent than they've been since Americans of all races and faiths, took to the streets to fight for the right of African Americans to be recognized as full human beings.

At a time like this, aren't you glad that faith abides along with love? Because as we learned on Monday, when you're standing in the darkness and the sun itself has vanished, it takes faith to believe that the light will come again.

The good news is that as Christian folk, we know this story well. The even better news is that we also know how it ends.

Our faith was born out of a kind of eclipse. The sky literally went dark on that first Good Friday, and for the disciples the darkness persisted until, finally, three days later, the bright light of hope broke through again when Christ burst out of that dark tomb on the first Easter morning.

From that moment on, the Christian faith has been rooted in the belief that in the world God has made, light always displaces darkness eventually; in the world God has made, love always wins, in the end.

And if the light has not yet broken through and if love has not yet won, then it's not the end. There is still more work to do.

Of course, this sounds exactly like what you'd expect a preacher to say on a day like today. Except I'm not just giving you my personal theology.

We've seen the truth of this claim play out repeatedly on the world-historical stage. We've heard it in famous stories we tell again and again, about famous people, in famous places, people like Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu, in places like Selma and Soweto.

So I'm going to highlight the truth of this claim with a less familiar story today, about a less famous person, in a less familiar place.

James Stockdale, or to be more precise -- and I love this -- James Bond Stockdale, started off his military career as a naval aviator. In 1964 he was stationed on the USS Oriskany, which was in turn, stationed off the coast of Vietnam.

On what became his last mission, Stockdale's A-4 Skyhawk jet was shot down. He was promptly taken captive by the Vietcong and he spent the next seven and a half years in the notorious Hoa Lo prison, better known as the Hanoi Hilton.

Now, you can argue that James Bond Stockdale ought not to have been flying bombing raids over Vietnam in the first place. That's a legitimate argument, but it's also one for another day and another time.

What you can't argue about is what happened next. As the highest-ranking officer among the population of American prisoners, it was Commander Stockdale's job to lead his men in the fighting the good fight -- the fight to keep their faith alive, the fight to keep themselves alive.

He did this by building the prisoners' resilience. And he did that, in turn, through the practice of what my wife calls ferocious optimism. Or to use the biblical term for it: hope.

Stockdale observed early on that the men who did not last were the ones who embraced a kind of Pollyanna optimism. Which is a fancy way of saying that the men who died, were the men who lived in denial.

So, Stockdale did a difficult and counterintuitive thing. He encouraged his men to be honest about their plight, and to embrace two opposing truths at the same time:

One, that their life as prisoners was in fact brutally difficult and help was likely not on the immediate horizon.

And, two, that with faith and patience, they could survive to the end, until help finally did come.

Stockdale's unusual, reality-based survival strategy was so successful it became famous, and it bears his name to this day: The Stockdale Paradox.

Here's what I imagine the Stockdale Paradox might sound like today:

Yes, the darkness of this moment is deep, but this is our moment to shine. In fact, I'm going to push back on the darkness until (as Bruce Cockburn put it) it bleeds daylight.

Yes, this chapter of American history may be filled with hate and anger, but I'm going to rise above these dark impulses. I have within myself the resources I need not just to survive these difficult times but thrive in them.

That is ferocious optimism. That is biblical hope.

Which brings us, finally, to love, the last and greatest of our three virtues, the one that stands above all others.

To get at the nature of this love, we must first quickly dispel a misconception. Because I Corinthians 13 is read so often at weddings, we've come to believe that the love it describes has a kind of gauzy, Hallmark quality.

That may be the love of our romantic dreams but it is not the love Paul is writing about here. We know this because he did not address his letter to a couple on the threshold of joining their lives together. He's writing instead to Christians in Corinth. Which is to say, he's addressing these words to a community in crisis.

The church in Corinth is riven by any number of intense conflicts: social conflicts around race and gender; class conflicts around who's in and who's out; theological conflicts around who can sit at the Lord's Table and partake of the Lord's Supper and who gets to eat crumbs at the kiddies' table.

Or to put all of that more simply, the Corinthian church was divided over the question of whether the lives of rich, privileged men matter the most, or whether the lives of women and slaves, and the marginalized members of the community, matter just as much. And if you don't believe me, please do read it for yourself.

Paul speaks his truth about the nature of love into this context, into a messy, complex, contentious world, which is to say, a world just like ours.

On Tuesday I got a first-hand glimpse of this messy contentious world. I went to a town hall meeting in Swannanoa hosted by our local congressional representative. The tension and anger in the room were palpable. And also completely predictable

Because anger is what you feel if you're poor and you or your children have a preexisting condition, and your health insurance is at risk of being taken away.

It's what you feel if you are a patriotic American and your ability to serve your country in the armed forces is about to be denied because of your gender identity.

It's what you feel if you're a person of color and you're made to feel unsafe in your own neighborhood, or unwelcome in this country where you've lived and worked for thirty years, and where you've raised your children.

Even if none of those things is true for me, I do understand the anger. As people of faith, we are in a fight for the soul and for the future of this country, and I'm all for taking this fight to town halls and to the streets.

But I also believe there is a more excellent way, and that as Christian people, how we engage this struggle matters.

I believe that if the white supremacists ever do march here, then, yes, it is absolutely our job to resist them. But I also believe the best way to do this is to patiently take our stand and to sing, and pray, out loud.

I believe that a warm loaf of freshly baked bread, will always convey the truth of what we believe more clearly than a white-hot dose of heated argument.

I believe that in almost every circumstance it's more important to be kind than it is to be right.

Which is why in the end I believe that faith, hope and love, these three abide. But that the greatest of these, the one that stands above all, is and always has been, love.

Amen