

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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1 Corinthians 13:1-7

2 Timothy 1:1-7

GIVING EMPOWERS LOVE

The military offensive was approaching. Israeli troops had moved into southern Lebanon in 1983 to hunt down Palestinian resistance forces which were using Lebanese territory as a haven. At that time, Fuad Bahnan was pastor of a church in West Beirut, a part of town that was primarily Muslim. In anticipation that an Israeli siege might reach as far north as Beirut, the church Session asked members of the congregation to buy all of the canned food they could and bring it to the church. When the Israeli troops did in fact move in to occupy Beirut, no one was allowed to leave the city and no outside supplies were allowed in. It was unclear how long the siege would last. The Session of the church met to decide how to distribute the food that had been purchased. The first proposal was to distribute food to the church members, then to other Christians, and if any was left, to their Muslim neighbors. But a second proposal directed just the opposite - that food would be given first to Muslim neighbors, then to other Christians, and finally, if there was any left over, to church members. The meeting lasted six hours. "It ended when an older, quiet, much respected elder, a woman, stood up and said, 'If we do not demonstrate the love of Christ in this place, who will?' And so it was the second motion that passed."¹

If I had been there as a part of that Session, I imagine that I would have advocated for a stance that was far less bold. Out of fear, I expect that I would have favored saving the resources for our own congregation and the other Christians first. After all, we had been the ones who had the foresight to stockpile all of the food. We had paid for it. I could have argued that charity begins at home, but I would have been abandoning the way of Jesus Christ in doing so. That congregation's Session did not give in to a siege mentality shaped by fear. Instead they gave powerfully and sacrificially based on a spirituality shaped by love. As a result, everyone was surprised by the power of the action. The choice that the congregation made was not only noticed by the Muslims of West Beirut, it shaped their opinions of the Christian minority in an ongoing way. As it turned out, by God's grace, there was enough food for all to last the time of the siege. How empowering a love that gives can be for those who receive it and for those who confer it!

And yet, love that doesn't give of itself isn't real love, is it? Or it is love that has gone underground, allowing other principles to dominate it. God could have looked upon human rejection of divine initiatives and said, "So be it. I will withdraw from you. You made your dreadful choices – go ahead and live and die with them." But instead, love was shown to be the absolute center of God's identity by the act of sending divine love personified in Jesus Christ. God's love doesn't give in to hatred or even to the great harm that can result from indifference. It doesn't tolerate intolerance and divisiveness. It works and works and works against that which brings brokenness. It works and works and works for that which brings true peace and genuine hope. Love does not afford itself the luxury to sink into despair or inaction.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about the central importance and fundamental character of love. He said that even if that congregation had great abilities and accomplishments, but failed to show the love of Christ to each other and to those beyond their congregation, then they had lost their very reason for being. Paul then critiques what the congregation had been doing by defining what love is and what it isn't.

I'd like to read that part of the thirteen chapter to you from a paraphrase of it called the Message:

"Love never gives up.

Love cares more for others than for self.

Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always 'me first,'
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.”²

There is spiritual wealth in the “Giving Empowers Love” theme that our stewardship team came up with this year. It is based on our passage from 2 Timothy about God’s people being provided a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. I hope that focus has shaped whatever pledge to the financial campaign you are able to make. Love unleashes giving and giving empowers love. I look forward to what we will be able to do together in the coming year, serving God boldly in our own context. Of course, what we face is different from a congregation in West Beirut over three decades ago.

But I dare say that we find ourselves in a context where love will compel us to listen to one another and particularly to those beyond our own circles. Love does not withdraw from those with whom we disagree. Neither does it withdraw from those who feel newly at risk in face of the style of the campaign that won the presidency. Many of those who voted for him hope that a President Trump presents different qualities than did Candidate Trump. There is clear evidence that hate groups feel like they have been validated in recent months and days. Love will need to stand up against abuses of power that target vulnerable parts of our society. Threats and violence must be countered with a bold love. It will need to amplify the needs of those whose voice is not strong. There are short-term economic needs that will push for ignoring long-term environmental needs, so our love for God’s delicately balanced creation will necessitate a show of determination. A bold giving love would also have been needed under a President Clinton, but we are called to the type of love that fits the context into which we are moving.

We begin by making a pledge to God, to our congregation’s Session, and to ourselves. A few minutes ago we sang of a God whose giving knows no ending. I would say that is because of the boundlessness of God’s love. I hope the financial pledge you are asked to make this day reflects a desire to grow into more of the loving person God calls each one of us and all of us to be. God so loved that giving up was not an option. When God’s love met resistance, giving in was not an option. With God’s love, giving powerfully is the only option and it is a generous joy to which we are called. There are those who will be looking to us to see how we define and demonstrate the love of Christ in this place. If it is generous, it will be powerful, and it will be transformative for us and for the recipients of our love.

¹ Michael Lindvall, The Christian Life: A Geography of God, Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001, p. 126.

² Eugene Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language, Navpress, 2006.