

1 Corinthian 13: 1-13

Holy Habits

Sunday, August 23, 2015

Rev. Heike Werder

The Congregational Church of Needham

We are creatures of habit, aren't we? We like to be or do things a certain way. We are very faithful to our habits. We all have good habits – trying to eat healthy or exercising regularly, etc. that are truly life affirming. Some people have really bad habits that are difficult to shake and are physically and psychologically harmful to one's self and others. And then we all have one or two or three or more annoying habits. I am the first to admit that I have them. In case of doubt, just asked the people who live with you. So before I sat down to start this sermon, I asked my spouse to tell a habit or two that annoy her about me. I asked her to be honest, and all I got was a grin of sorts. I know though what annoys her about me: I don't close containers properly. The cap of the oil bottle? Loose. Spices? Usually half open. Container lids? Loosely sealed. I always forget to turn off the treadmill power button. I never return the TV back to TV/VCR after I exercise. So the next person gets blasted by whatever channel I was watching while on treadmill. And usually, after traveling, it will take me weeks to empty out the suitcase and put it away. Annoying little habits...we all have them. And for the most part, they don't do any harm. So what? It is the bad habits that we need to deal with.

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians in hopes to break some really bad habits of this vibrant, young, and diverse community he helped to found. As I said last week that I wanted to take a deeper look into the theology and issues that the apostle Paul encountered on his mission of bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to the Mediterranean world. The communities of Corinth were his pride and joy, and at the same time, they were his greatest challenge.

This morning I am offering you a sermon in three parts: 1. I will tell you about what Corinth was like 2000 years ago. 2. You will get the cliff notes of Paul's 1st letter because it is simply a list of bad habits that have crept into the community life; and 3. I will share with you what Paul thinks is the cure to change bad habits into holy habits.

The city of Corinth was a large Greek city which thrived for hundreds of years before Christ. But about 150 years before Christ, it was totally destroyed by the Romans when the Greeks rebelled against Roman rule. It sat in ruins for about 100 years until Julius Caesar ordered it to be resettled as a Roman colony around 44 BC.

Corinth became the third most important city in the Roman Empire because of its location on the isthmus – a four and a half mile wide strip of land that connected the Peloponnesian peninsula to the northern part. This made Corinth a perfect crossroads for trade – land travelers as well as sea travelers with ports on each side. Rather than sailing around the southern tip of the peninsula, shipping companies would save a week's time by docking a boat on one side of Corinth, unloading the cargo, carrying it across the city, and then loading it onto another boat to sail on to Italy. (Today they actually have a canal for this.)

Corinth had a little bit of industry – bronze making, but the second largest industry was tourism due to hosting the Isthmian Games, which were similar to the Olympics. People who travelled to Corinth to see these games needed food and drink, as well as places to stay. In the absence of the modern hotel, people stayed in tents. This is why, incidentally, Paul was able to work successfully as a tentmaker when he was living in Corinth in Acts 18.

Because of all the trade and people coming to Corinth, it became rich very fast, but of course not everyone benefitted from all this new wealth. Interestingly, the city became a draw for freed slaves of the Roman Empire who gained wealth and status. Corinth became known as a prideful city and self-promotion became part of the culture. If a person gave money to have something built, he also paid to have a big stone chiseled to say, "I ____ built this ____." Because many people had money, they essentially competed to see who could have more public plaques.

Lastly, Corinth was known as a city of wild living. It had more than three temples to the Greek goddess Aphrodite, and that certainly influenced their understanding of sexuality. The city's devotion to Aphrodite combined with the large numbers of sailors and travelers passing through led Corinth to become known for promiscuity. Taking together the economic prosperity, the tourism, the pride, and the promiscuous culture, it's easy to see why one modern commentator called Corinth the "New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world."¹

Paul arrives in this environment in Acts 18 after he's spent time in Athens. He is successful in starting a number of Christian communities with the help of local leaders. He stays in Corinth for a year and a half and is joined by other evangelizing preachers who help him in this mission. And once Paul felt that the Corinthian communities were in good hands, he traveled on to Ephesus. But he stays in touch via letters, the documents that we are reading still today.

Apparently things in Corinth weren't going as smoothly as hoped. Some really bad habits stayed with the people who joined these new Christian communities. They brought their old life into the new life and it caused divisions and confusion among the newly minted faithful. Hence the letters. The two letters to the Corinthians are actually only two of at least four to five. We know that the 1st letter to the Corinthians, is actual the second letter Paul he wrote to them.

So, what was going on? This is the crib notes of 1 Corinthians

1. They were swayed by all kinds of preachers, and they decided to pick favorites. Among them were false teachers who were not passing on the wisdom of God, but their own.
2. Worship was a mess because everyone wanted to participate in it. Many flaunted their "assumed spiritual gifts" of prophecy and tried to outdo each other in worship.
3. Communion was seen as dinner and not as a community meal. People would come and go, eat their fill, and leave.
4. They also shopped at the wrong butcher shop for their meat. Paul made it clear that they should not eat any animals that were sacrificed in the pagan temples.
5. Many of the new converts continued to practice their new faith along with their old faiths. They continued to frequent the temples that worshipped Aphrodite and the services that they offered.
6. And because of what Corinth was – a wild and crazy mix of people and religions – this diverse mixture was reflected in the congregation: drunks, adulterers, sexually promiscuous, those who shopped at

the pagan temple meat markets, and self-promoters. And in addition, they had no trouble taking each other to court.

Paul, as we can imagine had his hands full. He never said that the Corinthians were not Christians. Rather he urges them to grow into their faith by changing their bad habits and adopting holy habits.

It is in this context that he wrote about Christian love. In Corinth, there were three temples dedicated to the goddess of love, Aphrodite, but Paul tells them about a different kind of love that goes so much deeper. It is quite a different kind of context for reading the passage of 1 Corinthians 13, don't you think?

All of scripture teaches us about holy habits. The good habits, Christ-followers habits, holy habits that Paul encourages them to adopt are hope, faith and love, but especially love.

A habit is an action or pattern of behavior that is repeated so often that it becomes typical of somebody although he or she may be unaware of it. Habits can be learnt and unlearned. This is what Paul had in mind when he wrote his letters to the Corinthians. He wanted the habits of love, patience, kindness etc. become so engrained that they would become second nature, a new nature, a Christ like nature in the Corinthian Christians who were still so much enslaved to their old world habits.

Paul knew from personal experience that Jesus' love could turn even the most screw-up person around. It turned him from persecutor of the Jesus followers to evangelist. I think that Paul would say, "If I can change, so can you!"

I don't know what your motivation is for being a Christian. Many of us don't know anything different; baptized at birth and a member of the church ever since. Others find their faith along life's journey. But no matter when we find our faith, I believe the only experience that will solidify our faith is that of experiencing God's or Jesus' unconditional love at some place, some time in our life. It will be that experience of holy love that will change our lives forever.

It is this holy habit of Christ-like love that Paul wants us to follow and live by in community. Paul writes this letter to a community that does not see eye to eye on a lot of issue, but I believe he is saying to the

Corinthians and to us that by practicing this holy love, by making it a habit, we will grow in our faith, and we will overcome the many issues that have the capacity to divide us.

Holy love is different than any other kind of love. Holy love is God's love, it is agape love. It is the "no matter what I still love you" kind of love. It is the love that God has shown us in Jesus Christ. It is the love personified in the story of the good shepherd who left the 99 good sheep in order to find that one lost sheep. This love is modeled in the father of the prodigal who killed the fatted calf when his lost son returned.

It is modeled when we welcome strangers into our midst, when we take a stand for justice and equal rights for all people, when we make sure that everyone is fed and clothed and safe, when we can still embrace those who disagree with us, or we with them.

To make this kind of love a habit is probably our greatest challenge as Christian. We know how this world runs and what it requires of us. Love is all too often not part of that.

But Paul encourages us to live into this holy habit of love in everything we do or say or hope to accomplish; to practice it in all of our human living. It is this holy love that will guide us to be patient and kind, not envious, or boastful or arrogant or rude or proud, or self-seeking, or easily angered, keeping track of all the wrongs. This love delights in the truth. This love protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.

Amen.