

“Community- Working in Christ”

1 Peter 4:8-11

**First Presbyterian Church
September 27, 2020**

Albert Schweitzer – physician, theologian, missionary, and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize – Schweitzer was once asked to name the greatest person alive in the world at that moment. The good doctor, whom many would have said was deserving of the honor, himself, replied quietly: “The greatest person alive in the world at this moment is some unknown individual in some obscure place, who at this hour has gone in love to be with another person in need.”

The Old Testament scripture that Alec read gathers us today in just such a Spirit of Christian love, hospitality and service. And it is Love, hospitality and service that the Apostle Peter says are essential to the work of ministry, to our identity as followers of Christ.

In his first letter to the church in Asia Minor, Peter says, “Above all, maintain constant love ..., be hospitable ... ,serve one another.” Maintaining constant love, being hospitable and serving one another are what we are called to do as members of this community of faith.

Today, we turn to the second in a four-part sermon series titled “Community – Living in Christ” September 13, “Working in Christ” today, “Strengthened in Christ” next week, and “Healed in Christ” on Oct. 11. When you think of working in Christ – doing the work of Christian ministry – what is the first thing that comes to mind?

Probably not love. We don’t think of love as work. But the type of love that Peter is talking about is work. Peter is talking about maintaining constant love – unconditional love. He’s talking about a love that, as he says, “covers a multitude of sins.”

That type of love is work, isn’t it? Anybody with a spouse or child, best friend or family member knows that it’s not easy to constantly be loving toward them, especially when they disappoint us, anger us, or hurt us.

Showing that you still love someone even after they’ve wronged you is the hardest thing to do as a follower of Christ. And yet, it is only as a follower of Christ that this type of love is even possible.

We are able to set aside our disappointment, anger and hurt only by focusing on the love of Christ, the love of God, who gave his only son that we would be free of sin – both the sins we commit and the sins of others we hang on to when they disappoint us, make us angry or hurt our feelings.

When Peter says that love covers a multitude of sins, he's not saying that sin doesn't matter. What Peter is saying is that when we maintain the love of Christ in our hearts, sin is in the past, put behind us on the cross of Jesus some two thousand years ago. Through the love of God, we are free from sin, free to leave behind our sinful ways and free to leave behind the anger and hurt we're holding to. Not easy, I know. It is work being a Christian, the work of being a follower of Jesus.

Let's do some of that work right now. Think about some hurt you're hanging onto, the anger you can't let go of. Picture it in your mind. Can you do that? Picture that anger and hurt in your mind. Now picture it hanging on the Cross – and not the world's cross of condemnation, but Jesus' Cross of forgiveness and new life. Can you picture it – your anger or hurt hanging on the Cross of Jesus. Leave that anger and hurt with him today. Let Jesus carry that burden for you. Because, as Jesus said, for him the burden is light and the way is clear. That is how we maintain constant love for one another, a love that covers a multitude of sins, a love that puts anger and hurt in the past where it belongs.

Peter also said, "Be hospitable to one another – without complaining;" that's the hard part. Hospitality – welcoming someone in, making room for them, attending to their needs – we all do that everyday, whenever someone enters the room, whenever we're at a stop sign and we let the other car go first, whenever we fix a meal or help set and clear the table.

The hard part is doing it without complaining. Or, as Deuteronomy said, doing it without being hard-hearted or tight-fisted, doing it willingly and graciously. Again, it is only in Christ that we can be that hospitable – so hospitable as to be ready at any moment to meet the needs of whomever God places before us, willingly and graciously.

Take for example the guy at his service club luncheon when the keynote speaker sat down beside him. The guest speaker was in such a hurry to get there he forgot to put in his dentures. Turning to the man, he whispered, "I forgot my teeth!"

The man said, “No problem,” reached into his briefcase, and pulled out a pair of dentures. “Try these,” he said. The speaker tried them. “Too loose,” he said. The man dug around again. “Here, try these.” “Too tight,” said the speaker. The man dug around again and said, “Here. Give this pair a try.” The guest speaker smiled, saying, “They fit perfectly.” He was able to eat his meal and give his speech without any trouble. As everyone was leaving, he went over to thank the man and return the spare parts. “I want to thank you for coming to my rescue,” he said. “Where is your office? I’ve been looking for a good dentist.” “Oh, I’m not a dentist,” said the man. “I’m the funeral director.”

Now that’s showing hospitality – at any and all costs. Maintain constant love and be hospitable, says Peter. And, “... Serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.” Here, Peter is talking about our gifts for Christian ministry. Maybe you have a gift for showering people with love, providing comfort and care. Maybe your gift is hospitality, making people feel welcomed and valued. Some people are gifted at teaching, others at fixing things. Maybe you can organize an event like no one else, make everything run smoothly.

Whatever giftedness you possess, I invite you to put it to use for the glory of God. Or, as Peter said, “... Serve ... with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things....” Whatever you can do to help out – around the house or at church, in your job or at school, out in the community or in your neighborhood – do it with God in mind. Do it with God in mind so that, yes, God will be glorified, and also, so that you will be fulfilled at the end of the day, and not depleted.

We end the day fulfilled and not depleted when we spend the day letting God supply our strength. When you step out in faith to love, welcome and serve others, God will be with you, God will guide you and energize you, just when you need it most. I talk about that in my column in the Oct. PresbyTimes newsletter coming out next week – how it is for me serving in our LOGOS ministry. What a great way to be energized and blessed by God.

You know, those who don’t feel the hand of God guiding them and the strength of the Lord energizing them, they are missing out. We miss – not because God is not there for us – but because we’re not there for God; we just don’t show up sometimes. I mean, it’s easy to do what you want. It’s much harder – and yet so much more rewarding – to do what God calls you to. And the only way we do that is by working in Christ, serving alongside one another in the Spirit of Christ.

God has great things in store for this church. God has many blessings in store for your family and this world we live in. And God has a place for you in making it all happen.

So don't turn away from the opportunity to love others and forgive them as you would be loved and forgiven. Don't miss the opportunity to be welcoming to friends and strangers. And don't go to bed this day or any other feeling depleted, when it is the strength and inspiration of the Lord that God longs to provide to you through your acts of Christian service. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

O God, we offer our thanks for the abundant life that is ours. We thank you for our church and for our church family. We thank you for those who gather here, and for those who are unable to be with us for this time of worship. We offer our gratitude for all the choices that are ours.

We thank you that we can choose where we live, what we eat and where we worship. So forgive us, gracious God, for the times when we have complained about these things. Keep us mindful of those who have no house to call their own and for those who do not know where their next meal is coming from. Help us to revel in our many alternatives rather than complain about many decisions.

Open our eyes and open our hearts to those who are struggling with the business of going on. Help those who find themselves in a muddle without hope to hang on to the promise that morning comes, and that, someday, the morning will bring joy. Grant us the patience to sit with others in their quandaries and pain. Help us to understand those who are not in a place to embrace life with joy. We offer our prayers in the name of Jesus, who always hears our cries for help.

Send your Spirit of comfort and care upon all those we continue to hold in our prayers, in Jesus name, who always hears us, and who taught us to reach out to God in prayer, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**