



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

2 Poland Manor
Poland, Ohio 44514
330-757-1547

January 31, 2016

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Re-Thinking Church: Part Three

I Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

John 14: 1-6

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.' ⁵Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' ⁶Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

I am convinced that the invention of the GPS (Global Positioning System) improved the quality of my life. Karen, (my wife), will add that it has also helped our marriage. The feeling of being lost or not sure of my destination causes me great stress and anxiety. I become grumpy and chippy, and am not my best self. I need to know where I am going.

"Karen, where is the map??"

I am not unique. Most of us become anxious, even irritable, when we don't know where we are going.

The same is true for the church. The world is changing. The church is changing. A great deal of the anxiety and distress exists in the church these days is because we are not exactly sure where God is leading us. Much of the conflict and “brush fires” that local congregations experience these days have their genesis in this lack of clarity. When a congregation is between pastors, the future seems even more uncertain.

One of the most telling statements in the New Testament comes from Thomas the disciple, (good old doubting Thomas). It was a conversation about the future. Thomas interrupted Jesus and said, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” This was a question borne of anxiety. “We do not know where you are going...” “We do not know where we are going.”

Thomas was the modern disciple. He was one who wanted proof. He was the one who experienced the world and life through his senses. Believing for him was seeing, touching, and tasting. “Lord, we do not know where you are going.” Thomas wanted a road map.

- He wanted a plan,
- a strategic plan,
- a five-year plan,
- a mission plan.

He wanted a clear direction. We don’t hold Thomas up as a model of faith... but he is the most contemporary of disciples. He is like us. We are not sure where the church is going. We are not sure what is happening. Consequently, we are looking for assurances. Like Thomas, we want a plan. We want clarity. We want to know what to anticipate. We don’t want surprises. We want to know the way through the future. We want a spiritual/ecclesiastical G.P.S.

My previous two sermons raised anxiety and discomfort about the future. As I was working on them I kept asking myself, why I could not articulate a vision of where we are going: a plan, a destination, a roadmap. The Old Testament prophets also struggled with this. Jeremiah’s message was that God was “tearing down and plucking up.” Everyone could see things falling apart, but what was God building and planting?

“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

The Apostle Paul also struggled with this same issue with the church in Corinth. The future was unclear. He described the situation with these words: “Now we see in mirror dimly.” The people of Corinth would’ve understood this metaphor. Corinthian polished brass was known throughout the ancient world. It was polished to make mirrors, but without enough light, those mirrors would reflect poorly and not render a satisfying image. “Now we see in a mirror dimly.”

- How do we live together when we are not sure where we are going?
- What does it mean to be a disciple in the midst of tumultuous change?

- How do we act when the foundations are shaking all around us?
- How do we find our way?

Jesus told Thomas: "I am way, the truth and the light." Paul, concluded the 12th chapter of his letter to the Corinthians with these words: "I will show you a more excellent way." He then penned the words: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." The way is love: the love that was embodied by Christ. "I am the way, the truth, and the life." The way is love.

Paul described Christian love, (the way of Christ) in straightforward language:

- Love is patient;
- love is kind;
- love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
- It does not insist on its own way;
- it is not irritable or resentful;
- it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

In our era of change; tumultuous change, Paul challenges the church, (He challenges Poland Presbyterian Church) to embody this type of love in its common life.

Dramatic change is the soil in which the seeds of conflict grow and blossom. We human beings become nastier, selfish, and pugnacious in the midst of change. When good people are afraid, they can act in ugly and destructive ways. The challenge for the church today is to let go of our fears and embrace the future with faith—faith that embodies the virtues of Christian love. "We see in a mirror dimly." "We do not know where we are going." Consequently, we need to love. We need to follow Christ's example of self-giving love.

Isn't that what faith is? Journeying to where we know not where—following Christ.

A number of years ago, a member from my previous congregation sent me an article entitled, "Dark Night of the Church". The article dealt with the statistical reality with which congregations were struggling, (and still are!).

Loss of market share. Conflict. Absence of young adults. Financial crisis. These are phrases from a lexicon of decline. They provide a sobering but honest narrative. But while they reveal some things, they hide others. (Christian Century, Dec. 14, 2012)

There is another story that the statistics do not reveal, and that is where we need to focus. We need to remind ourselves that sociological descriptions do not wholly define the modern church. We are more than an institution, and God's work defies graphs and charts.

God is waking us up and calling us.

- God is calling us to let go of a past and embrace a new, (albeit different) future.
- God is calling us, just as God called His people from the fleshpots of Egypt.

- God is calling us, just as God called Peter and Andrew, James and John from their boats and nets.
- God is calling us to leave behind the trophies of our history, our nostalgia for the past, and walk with Christ and embody an ethic of sacrificial love.

Love: We understand the words of Paul.

- We understand what it means to be patient and kind, even if we are not always patient and kind.
- We understand what it means to avoid envy, bragging, arrogance and rudeness.
- We know that we shouldn't insist on our own way, (but we usually do.)
- We know we shouldn't be resentful or irritable.

These are the marks of a civil society and sadly civility is breaking down in our world. I fear the church is aping the images of the popular culture when it gives in to its baser instincts. We don't need sermons on how to love—perhaps, however, a reminder on why to love.

- Love in a changing world, bears all things. There are a lot of burdens to bear!
- Love in a changing world, believes all things. Our generation hungers to believe!
- Love in a changing world, hopes all things. We are hope deprived!
- Love in a changing world, endures all things.
- Love in a changing world, doesn't blame, it takes personal responsibility for our own behavior.
- Love in a changing world, doesn't find fault, it finds ways to help.

This is not a bad time for churches. It is a good time for discipleship. I also believe that it is a tremendously hopeful time, if we can embody love in our common life and not give in to the evils that divide. Love will enable us to bear whatever happens; to believe in spite of what happens; to hope, even when others are hopeless; to endure, indeed prevail. Is that not the message of Easter?

Paul reminds us... as we journey to where we know not where... to love one another... until at last we arrive and see face to face. Amen.