

# FAITH, HOPE, & LOVE

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

January 31, 2010

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.

*(Third Sunday after the Epiphany)*



## ST. PAUL'S

### UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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## Lectionary Texts:

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; and Luke 4:21-30

## 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. <sup>2</sup>And 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. <sup>3</sup>If 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.*

*<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup>Love 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. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup>When 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. <sup>12</sup>For 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. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

All of the stories that we continue to see coming out of Haiti are certainly a mixture of the heartbreaking and the hopeful. Heartbreaking in that so many people have lost their lives and so many others have lost homes and loved ones and livelihoods. It is just tragic that people who had so little to start with have had to suffer so much. It is hopeful however to see yet a few miracles of people after days buried in the rubble being found alive and to see children who have lost so much learning to smile and play again. Life is often filled with a mixture of heartbreak and hope though seldom as extreme as we have seen it in the Haitian earthquake.

All of the stories have helped me to recall the eight days I spent there in Haiti 25 years ago. I went with a mission team from our Texas Annual Conference of the

United Methodist Church. We've been involved in missions in Haiti for many years. As you know, we had two UMCOR workers and one other person on a mission trip from Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas who were killed in the earthquake. United Methodist people have been working in Haiti for a long time. It is so close to us and the needs there are so great. Even before the earthquake, there was great poverty there.

Just as a reminder of how small our world sometimes is, as you know, we had three UMCOR workers in the hotel in Port Au Prince when it collapsed. Two of them, Sam Dixon of North Carolina and Clint Rabb of San Antonio, Texas, died in the earthquake. The third UMCOR worker, Jim Gulley, as it turns out, is from Colorado and is a member of the United Methodist Church in Breckenridge, Colorado where our St. Paul's members, Jim and Geralyn Smitherman attend when they are in Colorado. And in fact, they were there the Sunday that Jim Dulley came back home to his church in Colorado to tell about his experience, his grief, and his faith. It is a small world.

My own mission experience in Haiti 25 years ago was to help establish fisheries in small villages to supplement their diet and livelihood. We dug fish ponds in which the United Methodist Church would supply tilapia fish for the people to raise and both eat and sell. I had never heard of tilapia 25 years ago, but you can get them in many restaurants in the United States now. They grow very fast and are high in protein.

While I was working in Haiti in the same village for several days in a row, an old man came out to our site every day to watch and to help in the project. After a day or so, he spoke to us through an interpreter. He had brought his grandchildren and wanted us to meet them, two fine children, a boy and a girl as I remember. As the week unfolded, his intentions became clear. He wanted us to take his grandchildren back to America with us. He wanted them to have a chance at a life that he thought they could never have in Haiti. We told him of course that it was not possible what with laws and customs and passports and lots of practical things. He was undeterred. The last day we were there, he brought what little money he had and

offered to pay us to take his grandchildren. Love is not always practical. He loved his grandchildren so much that he was willing to let them go.

Faith, hope, and love abide, these three Paul wrote, but the greatest of these is love. French philosopher Albert Camus said, “Love is painful.” While it is not always practical, love sometimes is painful. Authentic love can drive you to do things you would not do for any other reason. Paul, and of course Jesus, want us to have that kind of love for God and for people.

Forty-three years ago, I preached my first sermon as pastor of a church. I was 19 years old and knew very little about being a pastor or preaching or life for that matter. In those days, I chose my sermon text from week to week rather than following the Lectionary. So I had the opportunity to choose the text that I would use for my very first sermon. I thought I would choose one that was pretty basic and one that I could not mess up or misinterpret, not too difficult, not too deep. I chose 1st Corinthians, Chapter 13, our Epistle text for today. There were only about 25 people in the little church and the same 25 people who came to church also came to Sunday School. Old Mr. Amon Moore, I can still see him, taught the Sunday School class that day. He had been a coal miner in his younger years. Mr. Moore may not have known much about pastoring, or preaching either, but he did know a lot about life. On my first Sunday to preach at the little church, I went to Sunday School class first. When Mr. Moore stood up to teach that day, he said, “I’ve chosen to teach the lesson today on love as we find outlined in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 13. My heart sank a little. So for an hour, Mr. Moore said a lot more in his Sunday School lesson about love than I ever thought about saying in my sermon. When it was time for my sermon, which followed Sunday School pretty quickly, I stood up, read 1st Corinthians again and proceeded to preach my sermon, such as it was. But I have to tell you that I had this feeling in the pit of my stomach, “What is left to say about love?”

Yet after all this time, not 43 years, but 2,000 years, there is still much to be said about love. For the most part, we seldom get beyond the greeting-card level of theology in understanding the meaning of Christian love. Love has to be one of the

most used, overused, and misused words in our language. What's left to say about love that might come close to what Jesus or St. Paul meant when they used the word? Perhaps it would be helpful to remember that the language of the New Testament, Greek, had three words for love. In some ways it would help us if we could still make those distinctions. They used the word *philo* to denote love as a good feeling toward people. Our words philanthropist, benevolent lover of humanity, and Philadelphia, city of brother love, come from this root meaning. Then they used the word *eros* to mean romantic or sexual love. We get the word erotic from that meaning. The third word for love was *agape*, which was a deeply engaged, self-giving love. It is the word *agape* that Paul uses in the text to speak of God's love for us in Jesus Christ and our love for others.

I wanted to preach my first sermon 43 years ago on love because I thought it would be easy. Now I know better. Love can be very hard. When Jesus read the scripture at his hometown synagogue, it was an opportunity for the hometown folks to show their pride in the hometown rabbi now beginning his career. Instead, they wanted to kill him, a pretty drastic response to one of their own. The whole experience started out well enough but went down hill quickly. The problem seems to be that Jesus wanted to draw the circle of inclusion larger than they were comfortable with. His example of hospitality and healing included people different from themselves. Drawing the circle wider will usually get you in trouble. Jesus spoke of a love that was not just for people just like us, but for all people as God's people. Love can be painful, is not always practical, and can be controversial, even dangerous. But it is the way of Christ and the way of Christians. According to Paul, it is the only thing that finally matters. Any material possession or spiritual gift is worthless without love. Paul says to us what he said to the Corinthians long ago: faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.