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Discovering Fire

John 13: 34-35
I Corinthians 13
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Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the great French Jesuit priest and scientist, wrote the following:

“Someday, after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness the energies of love. And then, for the second time in the history of the human race, we will have discovered fire.”

You’ll probably agree with me when I say that we humans haven’t harnessed the energies of love, all that well. The wars we are now waging and those we’ve waged for about 10,000 years, tell us as much. And yet, at the heart and soul of the Christian faith is that energy, the primal Force of the universe, we call love.

I realize that “Love,” as some kind of sermon topic, is much too broad for a single sermon or even a series of sermons. In fact, love is the very Ground of existence, at least it is for those of us who believe, like the author of the first letter of John, that “God is love.” But seeing that last week I spoke strongly against violent means of resolving conflicts and disputes, I thought that some alternative ought to be offered and so, I do want to talk about one small part of that Ground this morning that has much less to do with any emotional state or sensation that our culture usually defines as love. Love is action. It’s a way of being and a way of working in the world congruent with the purposes of God. When Paul wrote his first letter to the very messed

up church in Corinth he had established just a few years earlier, the most significant thing he reminded them of is that it is the gift of love that empowers them to be who and how they were created to be.

“And so, faith, hope and love abide, these three;
and the greatest of these is love”

so he concludes his glorious chapter 13 of I Corinthians. For Paul, love was anything but frail, human emotions; and it certainly is not passive. Like I just said, his infant church of maybe 10 years, was messed up, and the community needed some kind of power or energy which would bring them together as one, as God in Christ had made them one.

If you know the letter, you know that there were serious problems in this church: rival groups were jockeying for power and control; flagrant immorality; disregard for those who were not fully aware of the Christian life; the marginalizing of disadvantaged members of the community; and Paul’s own authority had been called into question. It was a fractious congregation, we might say; a divided mess, to be exact. And the most important issue was not that their theology was wrong, or that their music wasn’t of a certain style or their worship not free enough or structured enough. The primary issue was that they were all going about doing their own things, regardless of what that might have to do to another or the community, and because they were divided, they couldn’t be or do what God had created them to be – one, single Body, reflecting the very goodness of the Creator and creation itself. Divided, they couldn’t live out their calling as followers of Christ: to bring the reconciling love of God to the world, so that the world might be one. So, Paul called them to remember and showed them “the more excellent way”:

“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. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

Nothing is more important than love. It is the Source and the goal of their being, and is the gift that breaks down barriers that divide and destroy.

Have you ever considered that maybe the heart of the matter is that we are living a lie when we try to live separately, divided: enemy vs. friend, black vs. white, good vs. evil, spirit or flesh, heaven or earth, life or death. Somehow, we've given ourselves over to the Deceiver which claims that the one God made a world of separate parts that have nothing to do with each other unless we humans say so. And so, we hate the other tribes because they are different than us. We say “You are wrong; you're going to hell! because you don't believed like we do. We perceive what we call nature as an “It” and think she's only here to serve us and so we tear down mountains and poison her streams to get at the black gold that serves our insatiable lusts.

One day this week, I was walking over to the church early in the morning as an airplane flew at a tremendous speed overhead. I recognized it as a military plane and I thought, “I wonder what it's doing here? Where is it going?” My immediate answer was, “It's here to protect us.” But then I thought, “Protect us from what? Or from whom?” And in the next moment it struck me: Protect us from ourselves.

We have so separated ourselves from ourselves and from the Earth and God, that we humans have to protect ourselves from ourselves.

When will we harness the energies of love and discover fire?

Of course, it's rather easy to love someone in general. To say with deep conviction that you love people, is certainly a very good thing and it's probably quite true! But to love another

person or a group of people different than ours, in particular, is not so easy. In the book, The Brother's Karamazov, as we find throughout the book, Dostoyevsky has several characters engaged in a long conversation. In one of them, Ivan begins a long conversation about how we live or don't live with others. He begins with these words:

“I must admit, I have never been able to understand how it was possible to love one's neighbors. And I mean precisely one's neighbors, because I can conceive of the possibility of loving those who are far away. . . . If I must love my fellow man, he had better hide himself, for no sooner do I see his face than there's an end to my love for him. . . . it may be conceivable to love one's fellow man at a distance, but it is almost never possible to love him at close quarters. . . . If life were like the theatre, the ballet, where the beggars come out in silken rags and beg while they perform the graceful steps of a ballet, then I suppose we could enjoy looking at them. But even then, to enjoy looking at someone is still not the same thing as loving him.”

Do you ever find yourself like Ivan? It isn't easy to love in particular, but that is precisely what Christ calls us to do. And, at least for me, it's easy to love someone or some group of people I happen to like or with whom I agree with on most things or whose company I enjoy. But those other guys? . . .

Christian love, however, should not be confused with being nice to everybody. . . . Love calls upon us to act for the good of those we like and those we don't. It means caring for those we can't really stomach and those who aren't “deserving” of our loving them. Love affirms the worth of another person, even if we think they have no worth. Gandhi once said that “a love that is based on the goodness of those whom you love is a mercenary affair.” I'm glad Jesus' life wasn't a mercenary affair, that he didn't base what he did and said on all the things I do or don't do, on whether I match up to society's expectations of what it means to be “worthy.” As Paul writes, “God proves his love for us that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

How will we discover fire for the second time, in our time? You remember Sojourner Truth, don't you, the remarkable woman born as a slave in New York state, who lived as a slave

but was, perhaps, the freest person one could ever be. An abolitionist, powerful speaker and woman of profound faith, Truth is recorded to have said this as part of her testimony to her faith:

“Praise, praise, praise to the Lord! An’ I begun to feel such a love in my soul as I never felt before – love to all creatures. An’ then, all of a sudden, it stopped, an’ I said, Dar’s de white folks that have abused you, an’ beat you, an’ abused your people – think o’ them! But then there came another rush of love through my soul, an’ I cried out loud – ‘Lord, I can love even de white folks.’”

This love isn’t sentimental or passive. This was a tough, active love that empowered her to fight more fiercely for the freedom of her people. For the rest of her life, Sojourner Truth continued speaking at abolition and women’s rights gatherings, condemning the horrors of oppression, all the while loving those who hated her or stood by passively and watched it all happen.

These are difficult times to really love. There is so much division, so much “us” and “them,” “the good guys” and “the bad guys,” the “right way” and the “wrong way.” In private lives and public dealings, in social interactions and public policy on how we’re going to solve common problems of local, national and global significance. But it is in these most difficult times that the energies of love must be harnessed in order for the fires of re-birth, new and peaceful life, can be re-discovered and brought to life.

Harnessing the energies of love for the purpose of peace and unity always has been the case in the fragmented history of this race of ours. When Howard Thurman was a fairly young preacher, he returned to his hometown in rural Florida during the 1930s and spoke to the church which raised him and nurtured him and taught him the faith, the same congregation which sent him to school and called him out as a preacher and pastor. He had been struggling for a long time to understand what might be the key to unlocking the heart of the racial problems of our country, and clear to him through all his groping, and strong in the midst of his struggle, was the

quality of the love that Jesus lived. And it burned in Thurman's heart that love is the answer to hate, love is the way.

His biographer recalled the meeting this way. As he spoke, "he reached for a glass of water and held it up before them, saying that it could be emptied by a compulsive gesture or that if quicksilver were dropped into it, the action of the chemical would push the water out from within. Was not the love that Jesus preached and lived like the action of the quicksilver, he asked them? "The Master," Thurman told them, "had no time to talk about combating hatred as that would have implied competing with it in some way. Instead, he showed that something had to be introduced into life that would displace hatred as the quicksilver displaced the water; and that something was love."

"We do love our own people," they replied to him.

"But we've got to go farther," Thurman said, "and love beyond our families, beyond even our churches. We've got to love the people who live on the other side of the Halifax river." He could see the incredulity on their faces.

"You mean love white folks?"

"It's the only thing you can do." Thurman closed his eyes and dropped his hands. "Yes," he said, but the sound was little more than a whisper, for what he told them was true, but he knew that none could say they proved it until they came to the end of their lives. 'Love those who hate you,' the Master said. This is the struggle in which all of us are involved. This is the way."

Indeed, this has always been the way Christ has called his church, even though we've fallen short over and over again. And perhaps, especially today in these times when we're tempted to applaud or keep silent when violence is met with violence and witness even more

division, it is time to harness the energies of love and re-discover fire. And remember: “We love because God first loved us” (I John 4: 19). We are not alone in this. We don’t have to create the energy of love out of a vast nothingness. You and I, indeed, the whole creation is embraced by and empowered by a Love that will not let you go.

May we rediscover fire in the words of Jesus:

“I give you a new commandment that you should love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”