

February 14, 2016

I Have Sinned: Half-Heartedness

1 Corinthians 13

Opening words: One of our basic human spiritual needs is for forgiveness. It is one of the things that draw us to Jesus. Jesus did not come into the world to be our role model. Jesus did not come into our world to be our teacher. Jesus did not come into our world to entertain us. Jesus came into the world to save us from our sins. Never forget, Jesus is our Savior. Colossians 1:13-14 says, "*He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*" Lent is a time to confess our sins and repent.

On this day, Valentine's Day, we are instructed from the love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. The Apostle Paul wrote these words in the year AD 55 to the Christian congregation in Corinth, Greece. The population of Corinth was approximately 650,000. In numerous ways, in Paul's time, Corinth was considered to be the chief city in Greece. It was the chief city in Greece when it came to commerce. It lay at the crossroads of travel. It was the chief city in Greece when it came to culture. Her residents placed a high premium on wisdom. It was the chief city in Greece when it came to religion. The municipality contained no fewer than twelve temples dedicated to various gods. It was the chief city in Greece when it came to immorality. Corinth was both vast and diverse. Yet, within her city limits, a Christian congregation struggled to survive. However, this church's greatest threat was not outside forces, her greatest threat was internal. Listen to what I am about to say. This congregation was both gifted and fractured. Her only hope was the one thing she lacked, love. Our scripture reading for today is 1 Corinthians 13. Let me call this message *I Have Sinned: Half-Heartedness*.

1 Corinthians 13 If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully,

even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

I love this, it is entitled "A love letter lament":

Dearest Jimmy,

No words could ever express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you!

*Yours forever,
Marie.*

P.S., And congratulations on winning the state lottery.

Today, I don't want to talk about that kind of love, I want to talk about true love. If you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

This morning we are instructed from a piece of scripture you have heard many times; it is a piece of scripture I have read countless times. You know the scene. The plans have been in the works for over a year. No detail is too small to examine. The right theme has been selected with appropriate colors. The women's dresses have been painfully selected with a surplus of drama. The tuxes have been rented (the groom's was free). When the day finally comes, everyone is ready to get the show on the road. Surrounded by his silly-acting friends, the groom paces until the magic hour. The bride, surrounded by her friends, who have never looked better, prays that she will walk down the aisle without incident. The organist brings the grand instrument to life and the minister looks like a rock star (that is always the case in my stories). As the ritual proceeds, everything is flawless. The father gives away the bride and then the moment comes. All eyes are fixed on the cousin, who didn't make the wedding party. The bride feels bad for her but the cousin herself is relieved. Why? Because, she didn't have to pay for the overpriced, ugly bridesmaid dress. As nervous as a cat, she stands up and introduces the sacred text, 1 Corinthians 13. Then, she begins to read, *"And now let me show you the most excellent way..."* Everything is perfect except for one mistake. Only the rock star preacher knows the mistake. The Apostle Paul did not write these words for young couple uniting in marriage, the Apostle Paul wrote those words to a gifted, yet divided, church.

Have you ever been part of a gifted, yet fractured, church? Have you ever been part of a church that confused tolerance with love? On paper, everything looks good. With little debt, the building is well maintained and is located in a stable neighborhood. The pastor is both well-educated and experienced. The congregation consists of pleasant people, who have known personal and professional success. The printed brochures in

the pews are filled with colorful pictures of church ministries and activities. The back page is filled with information on the congregation's glorious past. Every corner of the church is filled with various church possessions. Everything looks good, but the church is struggling. Attendance is falling and finances are poor. The problem can't be solved at an emergency board meeting or by introducing a new program. The problem is much deeper. The one thing this church needs, can't be purchased. Just like the church in Corinth, this church is gifted, yet fractured. Just like the church at Corinth, all this church needs is love. They have confused tolerance with love. It sounds simple to fix, but it is really quite hard. As a matter of fact, it really seems impossible. This church doesn't love each other; this church has a hard time tolerating each other. There is a world of difference between tolerating one another and loving one another. Have you ever been part of a gifted, yet fractured, church? Have you ever been part of a church that struggled to tolerate one another?

There is only one word for fractured churches: exhausting! They are exhausting for the pastor, because refereeing groups and individuals is stressful and no fun. They are exhausting to church members, because you can feel the tension in the air. Everyone is asked to choose a side. They are exhausting to the church itself, because there is no energy left to make disciples for Jesus Christ. The best they can do is maintain. There is no other way to say it, fractured churches are exhausting. There is only one question that needs to be answered.

What makes churches fracture? There is no single answer. Experience has taught me that churches can fracture for a variety of reasons. Time only permits me to mention three. Sometimes churches fracture over theology or doctrine. In 1956, the United Methodist Church began ordaining women into the ministry. Correctly so, the church recognized the prophetic voice of both men and woman. The prophet Joel says, "*Your sons and daughters will prophesy.*" Yet, some churches lag behind. There was a church in our own district in the last few years who fell far behind. The church fractured because they received a female pastor. There were no winners in this conflict. I really didn't worry about that congregation; they left feeling they were doing the right thing. I worried about the minister, who suffered emotional scars. There is nothing easy about the ministry; it is impossible to make everyone happy. Sometimes churches fracture over theology or doctrine. If you know of a church which has fractured over theology, say, "**Amen!**"

Sometimes churches fracture over the pastor. I have a retired friend in the ministry by the name of Don. At one time he served as a District Superintendent. He once told me that it was possible to categorize every pastor into one of three groups, A, B and C list pastors. "A list" pastors have a history of success. Good things happen no matter where they go. "C list" pastors have a history of disaster. Bad things happen no matter where they go. "B List" pastors have a history in ineffectiveness. Nothing happens where they go. He said, "Russ, if you consider yourself an "A List" pastor then you will always follow a "C List" pastor. In other words, you will always be cleaning up a mess."

How many "C List" pastors have you known in your life? Sometimes a church fractures over the pastor. Do you know of any churches that have divided over the pastor? If you know of a church which has fractured over the pastor, say, **"Amen!"**

Sometimes the church members fracture their own church. It is my experience that this situation happens more often than the other two combined. Years ago, I went to a workshop to study group dynamics. The leaders of the workshop introduced me to a concept called "elitist domination". What is elitist domination? It is when a small group dictates what the whole group will do. Sometimes the pastor is in the small group. Sometimes the pastor is not included in the small group. Churches who have not had an influx of new members for years, produce or breed elitist domination. Let me say this clearly. Elitist domination will kill or cripple any church. In church, everyone should have an opportunity to express their opinion. You know what happens. Opinions produce tension, but I have always considered it healthy tension. In Jonestown, there was no tension. Everyone drank the Kool-Aid. Have you ever left a church because some small group made all the decisions? Sometimes the church's members fracture their own church. If you can agree with these three reasons why churches fracture, say, **"Amen!"**

The facts don't lie. Did you know that 75 churches close in America each week? There is no single reason why they close. The topic is complex. Some churches close because the population base has dropped. That is our story here in Mahoning County. Did you know 70,000 people have left our county since 1980? The reason is not weather, it is economic. People need jobs. Some churches close because the neighborhood has changed. The middle class neighborhood is no longer middle class. The supporting congregation has to drive in to church. If the faces in the pews and the faces in the neighborhood don't match, there is a problem. Sometimes churches close because the congregation has fallen in love with a certain worship style that doesn't connect with younger generations. The issue is not what you like, the issue is what speaks to younger generations. Sometimes churches close because of spiritual immaturity. If you have an easier time reciting church rules than you do Bible verses, then you have a problem. However, I am more convinced than ever, the main reason churches close is conflict within the congregation itself. It is the same old story. Like Corinth, we have many gifted churches who are fractured. They have confused tolerance with love. Soren Kierkegaard once said, *"When one has fully entered the realm of love, the world, no matter how imperfect, becomes rich and beautiful."* On this Valentine's Day, let me ask you this question. Within the life of this church, do we love each other, or just tolerate each other? The answer to that question is the key to our future success. Let me end with this story.

History tells us during World War II, Adolph Hitler commanded all religious groups to unite so that he could control them. Among the Brethren assemblies, half complied and half refused. Those who went along with the order had a much easier time. Those who did not, faced harsh persecution. In almost every family of those who resisted,

someone died in a concentration camp. When the war was over, feelings of bitterness ran deep between the groups and there was much tension. Finally, they decided that the situation had to be healed. Leaders from each group met at a quiet retreat. For several days, each person spent time in prayer, examining his own heart in the light of Christ's commands. Then, they prayed and came together. Francis Schaeffer, who told of the incident, asked a friend who was there, "What did you do then?" "We were just one," he replied. As they confessed their hostility and bitterness to God and yielded to His control, the Holy Spirit created a spirit of unity among them. Love filled their hearts and dissolved their hatred." Wouldn't it be great to go to a church where love prevails? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" There is a world of difference between love and tolerance.