

We Need More Love

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Lillian Daniel

First Congregational Church, UCC, Glen Ellyn, Illinois

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-12

Just so you know, I wrote the title to this sermon long before I spent the Thanksgiving holiday with my extended family; so it is neither a reflection on how things went for us with my family in South Carolina, nor was it a prediction of how things might go. We actually had a wonderful time, but as we all know, you can't take that sort of holiday experience for granted.

This sermon title comes not from either the glory or the carnage of the Thanksgiving table, but from Paul's letter to the early church. He wrote, "May the Lord make you increase and abound in your love for one another, and for all." Not just increase, but abound. Don't just have more love, but really overflow with it.

Who should you love? Not just one another. Not just your church, your family, your friends. No. Abound in love for one another and for all. Everyone. It's hard to love everyone, so let's start with the low hanging fruit – the people we are closest to, the ones we already presumably love, the people who might have been sitting with you over Thanksgiving dinner this year – our friends and our families. Picture the holiday family gathering. Can you honestly say you love all the people there? Perhaps you loved them all before they got there, loved them in theory, back when they were all promising to bring one dish or another, before they showed up without the thing they said they'd bring. Perhaps you loved them before you found out that two were newly vegetarian, and one could eat no carbs, but no one told the cook.

Perhaps you loved them before you realized how many of them there were.

But once they all got there you began to wonder, "Who invited all these people?" Or perhaps there was just one short little moment when you wondered, "Why did I come all this way? If I were not related to them, would I be here with them?"

So Paul reminded everyone, even the church, that we always need to work on increasing our love for one another. And not that increasing it is enough. We are to abound in love. And not that loving the people we know is enough. We need to love everybody. The world needs more love, and we are the only earthly suppliers of love God has to work with.

There is a Norman Rockwell painting of a family gathered around the family Thanksgiving table, and the table is laden with all sorts of delicious things. The father leads the family in prayer, and all the children have their heads bowed reverently. But what are they really praying for, that perfect looking family? Out loud the father may

have been thanking God for the food, while one child may have been praying, “Oh please let me get to the sweet potatoes first,” while mother may have been praying that her husband would get through the meal without yelling at his son. The son may be praying for a stress-free meal and the chance to listen to the game on time. An auntie may be praying that her marriage improves, while her husband may be praying that it ends without too much drama.

Underneath the veneer of holiday photos are complicated realities, deep desires, and real life. If you had a moment of tension over the holiday, you are not alone. You are like the Norman Rockwell family, with the picture they present to the world on the one hand and the simmering psychological realities that bubble underneath on the other. And if that’s family life, what about the life of the early church, where they weren’t even related, but worshiped together in people’s homes, really got to know each other like families? To them Paul says, “How can we thank God enough for you? Night and day we pray to see you face to face.”

Now that Thanksgiving is over, are you praying for the next time you can be together face to face, or are you perhaps ready for a little break? Or perhaps both emotions at the same time. Today’s reading suggests that both of those things can be true at the same time. You can pray for and love one another and also recognize that it isn’t always easy. If love were easy, we wouldn’t have to work at it.

Last Thanksgiving, we were not with any of our relatives. Last year was one of those years when some relatives gathered in smaller groups instead of as a large one, and our little nuclear unit in Glen Ellyn found itself with nowhere to go. Comparing notes with friends, we discovered they were in the same boat, with a matriarch who no longer wanted to pull everyone together, but no clear leader in the next generation ready to get the job done. So we got our two nuclear families together in Indianapolis and celebrated the day together as friends, both swearing it would be the most stress-free Thanksgiving ever, since nobody was related: no family dynamics.

Well, we really did have a nice time, but what do you think happened? After a day or two in each other’s company under the same roof, our two unrelated families started having family dynamics with each other. After the turkey was put away and naps and walks had been taken, the rest of the early Thanksgiving evening stretched out in front of us, and we realized we had pretty much run out of conversation as well as the politeness of being with friends rather than family.

Suddenly, there was the division of family dynamics. Suddenly there were two opposing groups, one who wanted to go out and see a movie, and one who didn’t. But the group that wanted to see a movie was divided about what movie to see. And the group that didn’t want to see a movie was divided between those who wanted no one to see a movie, because that’s not what you do on a holiday, and those who didn’t care if some people left for a movie, since they were ready for some introvert time anyway. Each of the two groups divided by movie were divided as to whether seeing two different movies was acceptable or if we really all needed to see the same one in order to make this a holiday. All these groups and there were only seven people involved.

Family dynamics come up whether any relatives show up or not. People, put together for long periods of time over nothing but brown food. Any group will have tensions that take even the most love-focused person and frustrate their good intentions. Why? Because we all bring different expectations to the table. We all bring

different histories and different family stories, even when we're in the same family. Love is not a feeling. It is hard work.

Our culture tells us that love is a feeling, an emotion that we either feel or don't feel. But not so for the followers of Jesus. When it comes to love, if we want to follow Jesus, we don't get to say, "Sorry I'm just not feeling it." Because in this spiritual tradition, with wisdom gained many thousands of years before the recent therapeutic age, love is not a feeling, but a practice. And before it's a regular practice, it's a decision, as in "I am going to do this. I am going to overflow, to abound in love." That's why Paul reminded us to do it, and reminds us still. He says we need to increase in our love because God knows just by looking at us we do not already have enough. And don't just increase, he says, but abound. So how do you do that?

There's a clue in the reading that connects nicely to the holiday we just celebrated. Before talking to us about increasing our love for one another and for all, Paul models the way to get started. Do you remember the first thing he said in today's reading? "How can we thank God enough for you? In return for all the joy we feel before God because of you?" Paul sets the stage for more love with one simple move – gratitude.

That's how you prepare to increase in love. First gratitude, for the person and the people you already know. So you begin by giving thanks for the people around the Thanksgiving table, those who were here this year, and those who were here in years past. After gratitude and love for the people you know, you're just about getting ready for loving all the people you don't.

It sounds so simple. I find it very easy to be grateful for the people I have lost. When I am alone at the table, feeling lonely and far away from the people I love, I am very grateful, almost to the point of being maudlin. It's a little harder to be grateful for people in the flesh, especially with those family dynamics. But that's where it all starts. Our nearest and dearest, our family, or those closest friends who are our chosen family – that's the farm team for the major leagues of loving everybody. We have to start there, in our family friendship farm teams, with gratitude.

I heard a very wise and kind man tell a surprising story about his home life. Every night he would come home from work, say goodnight to his wife who was an early bird, and then look forward to a few hours alone, watching television, reading a book, and just winding down from the day. He was a night owl, his wife was an early bird, and the arrangement worked beautifully in the marriage. But as his little daughter grew up, she turned out to favor her dad in this regard. She was a night owl too. And so after his wife went to bed, his daughter would join him in the family room. Suddenly it was her hand on the remote and not his. "Go to bed," he would tell her, which ceased working as she got older. If he got to pick out a show, now as a teenager, she was there spreading out her lap top, taking over the coffee table, listening to music on her headphones so loud that he could hear it too.

To show his annoyance, he would abruptly turn off the television as if to demonstrate to her how difficult she had made it for him to enjoy his show. He would throw open his book dramatically, as if to say, "See what you have made me do? Read this book, when I really wanted to watch TV." But clueless, she would then pick up the tossed aside remote and tune into her favorite show.

"You're staying up too late," he barked. "Don't you have homework?"

"I've done it," she said. It would be the same conversation night after night.

And finally, he said, “Never mind your homework. You need to be alert for school the next morning. Staying up late will set you back tomorrow.”

“It doesn’t seem to be affecting you, Dad,” she said. “You hold down a successful job and stay up late every night. You don’t sleep much, but people talk about what a great guy you are. What makes you think you’re different?”

“I am different, I’m an adult, and I’m the dad,” he said, thus shutting off all conversation. “You need sleep or your grades will slip, and you’ll get into trouble, and...you just need to get out of here and go to your room.”

Tears filled the girls eyes. “I get good grades, Dad. I don’t fall asleep in class. I just don’t need much sleep. The truth is I’m a lot like you, and because of that, I actually look forward to our time together, and the only time I can get that is late at night. But clearly you don’t feel the same way. You just want to get me out of here.” And as she marched off, her shoulders shaking with tears, he realized to his surprise that she was right. He did want her out of there. He had treasured that time alone over the years. It was his time. He was a good man, well known for his kindness and compassion, but those late night hours were the only time he didn’t have to cater to other people.

He stayed up all night considering his reaction to his daughter’s presence in the family room over the last year, as she was growing into her own personality, which in so many ways resembled his. She was a night owl. But at night, she did not reach into herself. She reached out to him.

And then he stopped to take a moment for thanksgiving and gratitude. He gave thanks for his daughter, that as a teenager she wanted that time in the same room with him. He gave thanks that she had so many interests and prayed that all that multi-tasking that drove him crazy might serve her well some day. He gave thanks for his wife the early bird, and for the daughter who took after him, and he found his love increase, and even abound. The next morning he sat his daughter down and talked to her about being a night owl, and this time he did not focus on her grades, but upon his own childhood, what his average work day was like, the number of meetings and the difficult tone of them, and because he was thankful for her, he was honest and talked about the longing, all that it had created in him for just a little bit of space.

As for his daughter, she listened. The next night she did not come to the family room, but stayed in her room, and her father’s heart ached with the pain of a great loss he had not known he would have ever missed. Nights went by, and he had all the time to himself that he needed, and he felt indescribably lonely instead. Finally, after a week, she came into the family room one night. He did not react outwardly, not wanting to overreact. So instead he watched her out of the corner of his eye, catching her reflection in the television set, listening to her flip the pages of her magazine and giving thanks for it, knowing that in just a few years this would be happening in some college dorm room far away.

If you had asked him a week before if it was possible for him to love his daughter any more than he did, he would have said, “Impossible. I couldn’t possibly love her more than I do.” But out of a conflict and an argument, he went to gratitude, and against all odds, increased his love.