

THE HARDEST THING IN THE WORLD

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

"Love seeketh not her own..." I Corinthians 13:5b (AV)

Like most of the higher mammals, ministers have a way of leaving their mark on their former territory. When he moves into the church study the new minister always finds little things left behind, things that often are quite revealing. Once when I was moving into a church study well equipped with cupboards I came across a huge stack of little books. They had dark red dust jackets with gold lettering that read The Greatest Thing in the World. I was told that these little books had been given in past years to members of the confirmation class. I decided that they were not anything I would be giving to any confirmation class of mine. The title turned me off. Were it not in gold letters, I would say that it sounded too purple. A glance at one or two sentences persuaded me that the style was not calculated to appeal to any junior high school students that I knew. The name of the author, Henry Drummond, said nothing to me except that it seemed to come from an era before light dawned upon the world - which is to say, before I graduated from theological school. And in any case, I would choose my own gift books; I would leave my own mark.

But what to do with the books? The Greatest Thing in the World - you couldn't throw anything with a title like that into the trash can. So the stack of books stayed there in my study cupboard through the entire six years that I remained in that place. Though they kept getting in the way I tried to ignore them until one day my curiosity overcame me. "What," I asked myself, "is the greatest thing in the world?" I opened one of those little red books and discovered that it contained a sermon on the famous passage by St. Paul that concludes with the words "...but the greatest of these is love."

So that was it. No great mystery. Only that overworked passage in First Corinthians that everybody has heard a thousand times. It is a passage that everybody thinks he understands and with which nobody cares to voice a disagreement. It is a passage that reads well at weddings and funerals. It lends itself to dramatic renditions. I think the most impressive reading that I have heard is that by James Mason in an old movie in which he plays an Irish revolutionary. He is half dead at the time: shot in the chest, as I recall. Yet he recites the whole thing from memory and with great conviction. That is why we invited John Dickerson to read this passage to you this morning. He is an actor, and while he might have done a better job had we shot him first, we figured that even in a healthy state he could do the thing justice.

The greatest thing in the world is love. Paul said it. Henry Drummond said it. Several generations of confirmation classes got the message. Far be it from me to contradict. If I wanted to get picky I might point out that Paul is speaking of a rather special kind of love, a divine gift for which he uses the special word agape. This is not just any old love you might happen to meet walking down the street. But Easter is not a day for being picky. So let us not split hairs. Let me go along with old Henry Drummond and declare with him in letters gothic and gold: Love is the greatest thing.

Yet, since I too must leave my mark, let me add something of my own. Let me add that love is also the hardest thing.

Perhaps that is not so obvious. You may agree that when it comes to loving your enemies, as Jesus exhorted, love is a very hard thing. But what about the sweet little baby in your arms? What of Miss America on an Atlantic City boardwalk? What of the venerable grandmother who carries in the leg of lamb for our Easter dinner? In those situations love may not require much effort. Sometimes, indeed, it seems that loving comes entirely too easily.

I grant that. Yet you cannot love very seriously or very long without experiencing the hardness of love. Surely one of the first lessons we learn in life is that love may bring a good deal of pain.

If I were to make a list of the things I am most thankful for, I think I would put near the top the fact that long before I went to school my mother used to read poetry to me, adult poetry. She read from the popular poets of her youth. Among these was Rupert Brooke. What lady over seventy does not recall Rupert Brooke and in the recollection shed fifty years?

There was one of these Rupert Brooke pieces written when he was hardly more than a teenager, that made an impression on me. He begins by saying that the seagulls tell him that "the best is over." Nevertheless, when he looks at the pine trees against the northern sky he forgets to play the lover and is happy again. I liked the image of the pine trees, but I asked my mother:

"Why is he so sad?"

"Because of a woman," she told me.

"What woman?" I wanted to know.

It seemed strange to me that my mother did not know. It was the kind of thing a mother ought to know. It seemed strange to me that Rupert Brooke did not do me the service of supplying this information. You would think he would have the decency to put a fellow on his guard respecting a woman like that. Still, I did get the message that love might be painful. And I learned something about the therapeutic possibilities of pine trees.

I don't know that I have learned much since, but those two things alone are almost enough for a lifetime.

There are many reasons why love brings pain. The most obvious reason is that if you care about another person, you care about what happens to that person. If that person gets hurt, you hurt too. Some of the ancient Greek philosophers recognized that this is so. Therefore, they counseled that it was better not to love too much. Some of the Fathers of the Church influenced by Greek thought, gave the same advice. In his book The Four Loves, C. S. Lewis observes that the fears of these holy men were well founded. "To love," he said, "is to be vulnerable." But he went on to observe that "we follow one who wept over Jerusalem and at the grave of Lazarus."

Christian love requires more courage than stoic apathy. It requires the courage to share the pain of others. And as the illustration of Jesus

weeping at the grave of Lazarus suggests, it requires the courage of grief too. Without love there would be no grief. With love, grief in some form is inevitable. In the popular novel, Love Story, Jenny's death takes on special poignancy because she is so young. But in almost every marriage one partner must grieve at the death of the other. And grief is not necessarily easier because you have loved a person for fifty years rather than only for two or three.

Another sort of pain arises when the relationship of love is a troubled relationship. There is another love story in Love Story, that of Oliver and his father. Though this story is told in a very stereotyped way, it speaks movingly of a very pained relationship. When Jenny calls up the father on his sixtieth birthday and tells him that his son loves him, Oliver rips the telephone from the wall and throws it across the room. But Jenny is right and Oliver's fury is the measure of the accuracy of her statement.

There are many ways in which love that is serious brings pain. "Love bears all things...endures all things." That is hard.

Still, I haven't put my finger yet on the hardest thing about love. I mean now the special kind of love that Paul wrote about, agape. There is one little clause in his description that says it. In the Revised Standard Version it reads like this:

"Love does not insist on its own way."

In the New English Bible it goes:

"Love is...never selfish."

However, I prefer the King James rendering, which in this instance is the more literal:

"Love seeketh not her own."

That is the hardest thing. The real challenge that love brings is not so much the challenge to care for other people, or to be true to them, or to give them our devotion and attention. The challenge is to keep our love from becoming so wrapped up in itself that we lose sight of the real needs of the other person.

For example, there are times when we are persuaded that we know what is right for another. It pains us to see him doing the wrong thing when our love wants so badly that he should do the right thing. Yet the fact is that our love cannot make decisions for this other person. If we are not careful our love seeking its own way may become dominating and possessive.

Another example is found in the situation where someone we love is struggling and in pain. Our love makes us want to help. Indeed, if we could, we would do the whole thing for the other person. If he is an invalid, we would walk for him. If he is failing at his job, we would succeed for him. But to do that would not be helping; it would be taking over. It would only be love seeking her own way in trying to relieve her own pain. That other person must do his own walking even if he falls on his face.

Still another example is found in the situation where our own need for another person is so overwhelming that we cannot perceive that the need may not be mutual. We think that if we just try to overwhelm the other person with our love, we shall be doing him a favor when on the contrary our love seeking its own way is simply an imposition.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh says something in one of her diaries that applies here. She writes:

"People talk about love as though it were something you could give, like an armful of flowers. And a lot of people give love like that - just dump it down on top of you, a useless strong-scented burden. I don't think it is anything you can give, or if you can, it is valueless.

Love is a force in you that enables you to give other things. It is the motivating power. It enables you to give strength and power and freedom and peace to another person. It is not a result; it is a cause...It is valueless unless you can give something else by means of it. It has taken me a long time to learn."

Perhaps you do not agree with Anne Lindbergh that you cannot give love, or that the gift is valueless. But there is an important insight here. If love is only concerned about dumping itself on people, as she puts it, and does not become a motivating force for giving other things, then love is seeking her own. It is very hard for love not to do that. I think it is the hardest thing in the world.

Now Easter is the celebration of the doing of this hardest thing. Jesus did it. And sometimes even we can do it too.

Jesus was a man who knew the pain of love. He knew the pain that comes from sharing in the suffering, the grief and the ignominy of those we love. You can tell that he felt very quickly and very sharply what other people felt - what the father felt whose son had fits, what the young man felt who wanted eternal life but could not bear to part with his possessions, what the woman felt who was about to be stoned for adultery. If love moved him so in response to people he happened to meet in passing, how much more must he have felt the need and the anguish of those who were close to him. And there was in Jesus too a kind of identification with the pain of humanity as a whole. We see him looking across the Valley of Kidron at the Holy City, its temple towers alight in the sun, the pilgrims streaming through the gates in a festive mood, standing there and weeping.

Jesus knew the pain that comes with grief for those we love. And he knew that anticipatory grief which all men who love life feel for a world that passes away and in which they pass away. There is a better poem by Rupert Brooke, called "The Great Lover" in which he lists the things he loves: such things as "white plates...wet roofs...the strong crust of friendly bread." But he goes on to say:

"Nor all my passion, all my prayers have power
to hold them with me through the gate of death
...the best I've known
stays here, and changes, breaks, grows old, is blown
about the winds of the world, and fades from brains
of living men, and dies. Nothing remains."

Brooke died in World War One at the age of twenty-seven.

Jesus too, kneeling in Gethsemane at the age of thirty-three, was a great lover of small things that pass: the wine at weddings, the lilies of the field.

Jesus knew the pain of a troubled relationship. There were the members of his family who thought he was mad. There were the neighbors who drove him out of town. There was Judas. Yes, I think he loved Judas too.

Jesus knew the pain of love. And God knew it. For that is what John means when he says, "God so loved the world that he gave....."

But the most important thing about Jesus' love was that it did not seek its own. It did not fall on people as a heavy-scented burden demanding attention. Rather Jesus' love was a tremendous motivating force that enabled him to bring strength, freedom and peace to others. I am sure that such love did not come to Jesus easily. The temptation story points to the struggle that went into his achievement. There were many options open to a man who wanted to be a liberator of humanity. In the end he chose one which he summed up simply:

"I am among you as one who serves."

"And the greatest of these is love." That sounds good. It is easy to hear. But it is not so easy to do once you learn to take seriously the way in which Paul says that love works, once you learn that "Love seeketh not her own." It is not so easy when you begin to apply it to your family or to your friendships. If you really believe that love is the greatest thing, the time must come when you will learn that it is also the hardest thing. But even people like us, by the grace of God, have been known to do the hardest thing. And when that has happened we have understood why there is no Easter without Good Friday, why there is no Easter without a God whose deity lies precisely in his infinite capacity to bear the pain of love, why there is no Easter without a man whose love "seeketh not her own," but rather "bears it out even to the edge of doom."