

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor William R. White

January 31, 2010 – Epiphany 4

Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org



The Sermon Text — 1 Corinthians 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. 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. 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.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 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. 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

SERMON

Malcolm Gladwell's best seller, *Outliers*, subtitled, *The Story of Success*, is about people who stand out from us in an amazing ways. They succeed in technology, athletics, music and business.

Before he tells us how these outstanding people reached success he tells us how they didn't. They are not self-made people. They did not rise from nothing. They are people with skill, but they received a hidden advantage, an extraordinary opportunity that allowed them to learn and then they worked hard and came out on top.

His first rule is what he calls the Matthew effect. It comes from the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus says that, everyone that has shall be given more and those that don't have will have the little they have taken away. The haves get more and the have-nots get less. "The rich get richer," partly because they receive the biggest tax breaks.

The smart kids move ahead, partly because they receive the best teaching and the most attention. The best hockey players in Canada receive the best coaching, and the most ice time, and if we are fortunate, they end up playing for Coach Eaves, though that is not a part of the Gladwell book.

So for success you need a skill. You need to be very good at something, and then you need the fortunate experience. Finally, you need to work very very hard. He tells of the 10,000 hour rule. You need to put in 10,000 hours of preparation. He says it works in computers, music training, hockey and lots of other areas.

My experience affirms most of what he says. One night following a wonderful concert at the church I served a man in his late 50s walked up to the pianist and said, "I'd give anything if I could play the piano like you."

The woman, who was about 35 years old must have heard this before, so she had a quick reply: "Would you be willing to rehearse 40 hours a week until you are 18 and then 55 hours a week for your four years of college? That is what I did."

I could tell by the look on the man's face, he assumed she sat down at the piano and could play. He had not factored in practice time. "The exceptional," Gladwell says, "don't have skills dropped on them, they work hard for it, even Mozart, the wonderkind. His father made him practice long hours daily."

Some people think the great basketball players are naturals and don't have to work at their skill. We forget about the number of hours that Michael Phelps invested in the pool, or the hours of dance lessons and voice lessons and acting lessons that Glen Close or Renee Zellweger have practiced.

But what about you? You can't throw a ball like Brett Farve, sing like Pavarotti, or program computers like Bill Gates. It may mean that you won't be an Outlier, but it doesn't mean you don't have gifts. To learn about your gifts and mine we have to leave Gladwell and visit with St. Paul, who tells us in the 12th chapter of I Corinthians that that everyone has a gift. Each of our gifts are important and can be used to enhance the life of others. Every gift is needed for the common good.

You may say, "All of my gifts are small and insignificant. Paul answers that there are no insignificant gifts, and that the ones that seem insignificant are really indispensable. To make his point he uses the illustration of the human body. Every part of the body is needed for the entire body to function. If you lose one part, the entire body suffers and has to adjust. We need arms and legs and ears and eyes. We need all the organs.

Try living without one of the parts of the body you think is unimportant. One year I was playing racquetball without protective glasses (I now wear them all the time). A ball hit me near the eye, shutting down my tear duct. I had forgotten I even had a tear duct. When I thanked God for hearing, and seeing, I forgot to say, “And thank you for my tear ducts.” It seemed like an insignificant part of my body until it stopped functioning. My eye felt like it had gravel in it, and I couldn’t function until I got that tear duct working again. Amazing how a small item can be indispensable.

Each of the body parts have been given to us for a very special reason—to work for the benefit of the entire body. Not one is useless. Used correctly, they build up the body or the community.

The same is true in your neighborhood, your job or your church. In the church some of us are gifted to teach. Others are gifted to preach. Still others are gifted in music, playing or singing. Some contribute. If you have that gift, do it liberally, he suggests. What happens if no one prepares communion, or no one helps us park cars? Little jobs? Perhaps, but if they aren’t done, we soon realize they are crucial jobs.

Are all the gifts equal? No, some are more important than others. How? By their size? No, the most important build up the body more than others. The most important enhance the lives of all the rest of the people.

In sports there is a saying, “He makes everyone else better.” That usually is said about someone who does a lot of little things well. In basketball, that person sets picks, works hard at help defense, boxes out for rebounds that a teammate may get and doesn’t make a lot of mental errors. He/she takes care of the ball.

My hunch is that every business has people like that. They can do more than one job and are willing to do so. They are willing to lend a hand when someone else is working on a project.

In the church there are three great gifts, Paul says. Faith. Hope. And Love, and hands down, the greatest of these is love. Why is love the greatest gift? Because love makes everyone else better. Love is always other directed, and the recipient is better off for having received it.

One day a brother and sister came in to plan their father’s funeral. They told me stories of their amazing father, who built his business from the ground up and made a lot of money. He served on many important boards and committees, and served as an advisor to the governor. “Your father had a major impact on your life, didn’t he?” I said.

They both agreed. They said, “He was a good man, and a talented man.” Then they paused and looked at each other. “But,” the man said, “it was my mother who had the greatest impact. She was the glue to our family. She attended all our games and made certain our homework was done.”

The woman chimed in, “My dad prayed whenever we had company, but it was my mother who said prayers with us each night. My mother sat on our beds and read

stories to us, and then prayed with us before we went to sleep. We are all people of faith, and the reason is that my mother gave us an example to follow.”

When they left I realized that neither of them used the word love to speak of their mother, but that was what they were talking about. Who was the greatest in the family? Money did not build up the family. Love, hospitality, and faith – built the family. The greatest of these is love.

I don’t know the details of the life of Tiger Woods. I know he is an incredible athlete, but right now I have a hunch he would trade a bunch of his trophies to put his life back together. He may be thinking a bit about the Master’s Tournament, but most of the time he is thinking about how to become a man, a father, and, I hope, a husband. Right now he knows the greatest skill in the world isn’t driving a ball 350 yards down the center of the fairway or hitting a pitching wedge. That doesn’t bring people together. Only love can do that.

We spend millions of dollars on beauty aids, but beauty doesn’t necessarily assist anyone but ourselves. We work out, and lift weights to get in shape, but though it is important to do so, our being in shape may never change the life of anyone else.

We spend thousands of hours at our jobs learning how to use our computers or how to invest someone’s money. We learn new skills which we can translate into dollars, but though we need money to feed our families those same dollars won’t shape the lives of either our life partner or our children.

We spend eight or more years of our life learning new skills, earning new degrees, but if we end up being irritable most of the time, or if that degree creates an arrogant smart person, it may be a terrible waste. What we learn is important, but to make a better world we need such things as friendship might, hospitality, and love. It is important to learn new facts, but it is equally important to care for a hurting neighbor, or to assist an underprivileged child. There is nothing more important than to love our spouse, and our children.

I’m grateful for the work of all the Outliers in our society. Many of them have made enormous contributions to our world, but not greater contributions than the mothers, fathers, teachers and next door neighbors whose little acts of kindness made life living.

It was love that changed the world.

It was love that saved the world.

This is the lesson that Jesus taught us, and we know it is true not just because he said it, but because he did it. Amen. © 2010