

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Spirit of God: The Necessary Ingredient”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Isaiah 65:17-25

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

It seemed like a good idea at the time. I was wandering down the baking aisle of the grocery store doing two things at one time. First I was picking up the ingredients for my mother’s world famous chocolate chip cookies; the cookies that were envied by all my friends. Second, I was trying to figure out how I could lose some weight. I know, they are mutually exclusive. It was then that I saw the sugar substitute, not in packets but in the large plastic container. The wording on the container said that it tasted like sugar, measured out like sugar and baked like sugar. Eureka, I said to myself, here it is. I can have my cookies and lose weight too. When I got home I went immediately to work. I should have known that something wasn’t right when the initial consistency was a bit off. Then I should have known something was even less right when the dough was not melting right on the cookie sheets. Finally, I knew something was wrong when I bit into one. It was in that moment that I gave into the fact that the one necessary ingredient in my mother’s cookies was sugar, sugar, sugar.

The necessary ingredient. In virtually everything we create or everything that we do there is a necessary ingredient. It doesn’t mean that there aren’t other ingredients. What I mean is that there is almost always a single ingredient without which, whatever it is we are doing, will not finally be successful. If we are baking bread, we need yeast. If we are creating a successful corporation we need not only a visionary leader, but one who will create an ethically sustainable community, that will nurture and support its employees and customers. If we are creating a great school classroom there are lots of ingredients that can make a difference; good books, a clean environment, appropriate technology. Yet the necessary ingredient is a teacher who loves children...and has great classroom management skills. And the same is true for the church. It too has a necessary ingredient that makes it the kind of community that God desires it to be. And if we believe the Apostle Paul, that ingredient is love.

In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul spends quite a bit of time discussing the ingredients that God mixes into the baking of the church. In churchy terms, we call these spiritual gifts, but they are, in essence, the spiritual ingredients that bake up a successful church. He names these as wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, teaching and tongues. Elsewhere he includes ingredients such as generosity, serving, compassion and encouragement. For Paul, all of these ingredients are important and contribute to the life and work of the community. Yet for Paul, love is the one necessary ingredient. Listen again to his words. *“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.”* Paul is not simply being poetic here, he is being prophetic, by making it clear that no Jesus’ community can be what it ought to be without the ingredient of love. And he does so, I believe, for two important reasons.

First, love unites people as neighbor, and doesn't divide them as enemies. Jesus' work on this earth was not, as I have said before, to get people into heaven. It was to begin the process of creating a new heaven and a new earth, as described by the prophet Isaiah. It was to initiate the Kingdom of God in which there would be no more weeping. In which people live long, meaningful lives. In which people enjoy the work of their hands. In which all of creation will live together in peace. And in order for this reality to exist, people need to be united. They need to be a community not only in the church but across the world in which all persons are valued and nurtured. This is what love does. It does so because it is patient and kind; because it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. At the same time, love is not those things that divide us. Love is not envious of what others have. It is not boastful or arrogant because of perceived status. It never insists on its own way. It doesn't rejoice in untruth, but in the truth. Love unites, and in uniting it begins to create the new heaven and new earth. Hate, on the other hand, while it can unite, the unity it creates is that of enemies who can never create the new heaven and earth. They cannot bring forth the Kingdom of God.

Second, love is the God ingredient. What I mean by that is that love is the essence of God's very nature. The writer of the letters of John tells us that God is love, and whenever we love, God is present. The Old Testament reminds us again and again, that God's steadfast love endures forever and that God cares for God's children like both a father and a mother. Thus when we love we are not only united with one another but we are united with God, in and through God's Spirit. We are united with the source of our strength. Paul makes this clear at the end of this chapter when he tells us that as the new heaven and earth come into existence all the other ingredients will slowly wither away because they are not needed, but love will remain. He writes, *"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... 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."*

Here at Everybody's Church I believe we do a good job of loving one another and trying our best to use love to unite the communities and world around us. Whether it is through casserole club, deacons visiting, pastoral care, serving at Alcott or Ruth Ellis, going to Mexico or Africa, we show and share love. More recently we have begun to make love more real in our congregation through a new ministry... Stephen's Ministry. This morning we are going to be commissioning new Stephen's ministers. Stephen Ministers are trained and supervised lay volunteers who enter one-to-one confidential relationships with people who are struggling with various life situations. They listen, support, and are true sojourners, living out the love of Christ. Within the life of our congregation then, they will be baking in the love of Christ into the lives of people who need a friend and companion on the way. The challenge for the rest of us, is to try and do the same. To let Love be that necessary ingredient in our lives and our relationships.

My challenge is this, to ask yourselves this question, how am I baking love into my life, in such a way that it offers glimpses of God's new heaven and earth?