

"When Peter Pan Comes to Church"

Scriptures: John 13:31-35 and I Corinthians 13:1-8

A number of years ago, Burt Bacharach composed a hit song that captured the world's feeling of loneliness and hunger for love. In part, the lyrics said:

*"What the world needs now is love, sweet love;
No, not just for some but for everyone...
It's the only thing that there's just too little of."*

That message still rings true today - we need love! Love for people, particularly among Christians, is one of the central characteristics of a believer's life in Jesus Christ. When you become a Christian, the love of Jesus Christ as communicated through you by the Holy Spirit should be one of your most endearing qualities.

Unfortunately, rather than being great Christ-like lovers, one finds many Christians suffering from what I call the ***"Peter Pan Syndrome."*** We all remember Peter Pan. Frankly, he's one of my childhood heroes: the youth who refuses to grow up and continues to dwell in Neverland where he can eternally engage in inconsequential fights with Captain Hook. While he's a lovable character, Peter's problem is his refusal to move on to responsibility, accountability and adulthood. Peter prefers the self-centeredness of childhood!

Sadly, Peter Pan Christians sometimes reside in churches. They are believers who refuse to grow beyond spiritual adolescence and progress to spiritual maturity. Whenever believers refuse to accept the responsibilities of godly adulthood, they remain spiritual teenagers. Unfortunately, these spiritual Peter Pan's are not difficult to spot. Those afflicted with this spiritual illness exhibit such traits as irresponsibility, loneliness, anxiety and selfishness. In short, like Peter Pan, their focus is upon self and their attitude is one of resistance, not cooperation. Because Peter Pan Christians are too self-absorbed, they refuse to demonstrate the self-denying, sacrificial love which Christ commands of His followers, *"Love one another, as I have loved you; so you must love one another"* (John 13:34).

The consequences of Peter Pan syndrome can be devastating both to individuals and congregations. A local church that has too many Peter Pan Christians will suffer as a result of the spiritual immaturity these people perpetuate. Peter Pan Christians spend an exorbitant amount of time trying to please and fulfill themselves, versus denying themselves as Christ exhorts us to do (Luke 9:23). You cannot be a great lover until you put the needs of others before yourself.

An good illustration of a church filled with Peter Pan Christians was the first-century church in Corinth. The city in which the Corinthian believers lived was well known for its idolatry and immorality, as well as its prosperity. It is no exaggeration to suggest that Corinth was similar to many modern American cities. Given their environment, it is easy to see how spiritually young Christians could have difficulties maturing in their faith. In Paul's letters to the Corinthians, he frequently addresses their spiritual immaturity and their need to move on to loving like Jesus Christ. For if we are dedicated followers of Christ, self-sacrificing love for other people which will characterize our lives!

Self-sacrificing, Christ-like love, is what the Bible calls *agape love*, and that is what we need most of all. "Agape love" finds its fullest expression in God's relationship to us. When we were unlovable, God sent His only Son to die on the Cross so that we could receive God's fulness (John 3:16, Romans 5:6-11). Although God did not need to love us, He chose to meet our desperate need for love by making us the gracious recipient's of His love through Jesus Christ. With this great truth of salvation in mind, the Apostle John writes, *"If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another"* (1 John 4:11). Indeed, the heartbeat of a healthy believer and healthy congregation is *agape love*.

So what does *agape love* look like? The Biblical passage which best expresses the essence of *agape love* is 1 Corinthians 13:1-8. In this passage we discover three truths about love which should govern the way we love one another.

The first truth we learn about loving one another is:

A. Love is Essential, not Optional. The first three verses of I Corinthians 13 convey this fact. Three times Paul states, ***"but (if you) have not love"*** (NIV). Following each of those statements, he adds a penetrating conclusion: ***"You are only a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal... You are nothing... You gain nothing."*** In other words, a relationship without love is like a car without wheels, or a house without a foundation. Take away love, and our lives and relationships amount to nothing!

Tradition tells us that when the aged apostle John was bidding farewell to his congregation, he admonished them to love one another. *"But we want some new words of instruction," they said. "Give us a new commandment."*

John replied, *"I write no new commandment, but an old commandment which you had from the beginning... love one another."*

The second truth we learn about loving one another is:

B. Love is an Action, not a Feeling. True love is not just *desiring* what is best for others. It involves *doing* what is best for others. Action, involvement, responsiveness - these are the hallmarks of genuine love. Paul communicates this by describing love in 1 Corinthians 13 in active terms: "***patient... kind... rejoices with truth... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things***" (vv. 4-7). These words teach us that love is expressed by our actions, not merely by our sentiments.

A man who had just arrived in Heaven, told Saint Peter how grateful he was to be there, and asked Peter to give him a glimpse into Hades in order that he might appreciate his good fortune. Peter accommodated his request.

In Hades he saw a long table covered with all varieties of delicious food. But everyone around the table was starving to death. The man asked Peter for an explanation. Peter said, "*Everyone is required to take food from the table only with four-foot long chopsticks. They are so long that no one can reach the food from the table to their own mouth. Therefore, each one is dying of starvation.*"

Quickly they returned to Heaven, and behold, the man saw an identical table, full of identical foods, but everyone was happy and well fed. The man asked Peter, "*How do they take the food from the table?*" Peter answered, "*Only with four-foot long chopsticks.*" At that the man inquired, "*Then why are they starving in Hades, yet so well fed in Heaven?*"

Peter replied, "*In Heaven, we feed each other.*"

We experience a bit of Heaven here and now, when we demonstrate love to one other in our actions.

The third truth we learn about loving one another is:

C. Love is a Long-term Investment, not a Quick-return Loan. There is nothing shallow or short about *agape love*. It "***bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things... and never fails.***" It is unconditional love, long-suffering love, resilient love. When the sea of life becomes rough and dangerous, *agape love* does not retreat, but seeks to navigate through the storm, trusting God to see us through.

It should be clear from all I have said that *agape love* cannot be obtained without a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Only through Him do we receive the power of the Holy Spirit to love as He did. Therefore, if we want to personally experience and share *agape love*, we must give ourselves to Christ in faith. Of course, we can refuse to embark on this road less

traveled, and we will remain Peter Pan Christians. After all, the *agape* way demands personal sacrifice and opens us up to potential heartache and abuse. Frankly, it is far easier to keep to ourselves, striving to satisfy our own needs and wants. For when you truly love something, you open yourself to the possibility of having your heart broken. That is because the only place, outside of Heaven, where you can be safe from all the dangers of love is Hell.

So which road do you choose to travel? The Peter Pan highway of selfishness, or the Jesus Christ road of selfless love? Only the road of Christ-like love leads to all God has to offer you. **AMEN**