

Romans 8.19-27, 31, 35-39  
1 Corinthians 13

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(Disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

*With thanksgiving for the life and witness of Reg Smith*

And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

And isn't that why we are here—because of our love for Reg and Mary Elva and because of their love for us.

This chapter from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians is often read at weddings when people are young and have all kinds of ideals about love. And then life comes a long and you have to figure out what love is when the going gets tough and you don't feel loving in the same way that you did. Paul writes of the kind of love that we would do well to spend our lives becoming. To live with each day until it is written in our hearts and words and actions.

Reg Smith lived large and he had a big heart. He was a guy who could do just about everything. He didn't just know a little about a lot of things. He knew a lot about a lot of things. He could cook a gourmet meal and pick out the wine for each course just as easily as he could design the heating and cooling system for a ten-story building. He could sculpt and paint just as easily as he could re-wire the electrical system in a house or climb a 14,000 foot mountain peak or qualify for the Senior Olympics in cycling.

He generously gave of his time to a host of organizations and to a multitude of people. Including here at Central. Reg finished a three-year term on the session last year and spent those three years as the chair (and majority membership) of the Property Committee. But his concerns at Central weren't limited to the physical plant. He baked bread for communion; he and Mary Elva hosted dinner at their house for a new member class; he counted the offering; he greeted people with his big smile and a warm handshake. A couple members of the choir have told me about looking out from the choir loft and seeing Reg's smiling face looking back at them. Another church member emailed some remembrances of Reg and said, "His eyes actually twinkled."

I remember seeing his eyes glisten—with the hint of tears—a number of times around the session table as we talked about decisions to be made. With all Reg's building and mechanical systems knowledge, it would be easy to stereotype him as a person who would just care about the bottom line or about preserving the property. But what Reg cared about were people. That shimmer of tears came as Reg talked about how a decision we were making would make a difference in people's lives. He was moved by what God was doing in our lives and what God was calling us to do to share God's love with others.

Who Reg cared about was us—in Louisville, in Denver, in San Diego, in Tampa—in all the places he and Mary Elva lived and traveled. And more than just us—he cared about the people who didn't yet have names and faces in his own life but who were in need of a dose of love.

His volunteer work with Project Women certainly embodied that. Project Women provides housing for single women who are experiencing homelessness and supports those women to obtain their baccalaureate degree so they can break the cycle of poverty for themselves and their children. Reg was on the board and was so enthusiastic about Project Women's new housing that is being planned near UofL. He talked a lot about it in the past months. The building project went from one size to a bigger size and Reg was thrilled about the possibilities this would provide for even more women and their children.

Thomas Merton wrote, "We do not exist for ourselves alone, and it is only when we are fully convinced of this fact that we begin to love ourselves properly and thus also love others. What do I mean by loving ourselves properly? [Merton asked] I mean, first of all, desiring to live, accepting life as a very great gift and a great good, not because of what it gives us, but because of what it enables us to give to others."<sup>1</sup>

Reg embraced life as a gift and reveled in giving himself generously to others. He lived this way around the session table of this congregation and in the whole life of the congregation. He lived this way when he and Mary Elva invited people to break bread together in their home. He lived this way when he traveled to Gautier, Mississippi to help people devastated by Hurricane Katrina. He lived this way in the gifts of time and energy and skill that he gave to many organizations and individuals. He lived this way in the love and support he shared with his family, with Mary Elva, his daughter, Cindie, his grandchildren, and all his extended family.

The Apostle Paul, in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians writes that love is the absolute necessity of the faithful life. Possessions, abilities, knowledge, powers—all of that and everything else we fill our lives with—don't mean a thing if our lives aren't grounded in love. We know that Paul had all sorts of credentials and he'd had a successful life of climbing the religious ladder but even with all of that, he says, if he lacked love, his own life would be of no value. "Without love, no matter how many possessions [we have] or how prominent [we are], [we are] lost and as good as dead."<sup>2</sup>

We begin with God's love for us. In God's love, we are renewed and made whole. That love in us finds expression in loving others—which is our proper gratitude for God's love. Love "is realized fully only in it being shared with someone else. We who have been fully loved by God honor and relish that love most completely...in...sharing...it with others." Paul's perspective is that one's own well-being is tied up in the well-being of others. "So, to look after the interests of others is inescapably to benefit all the [people in a] community and therefore to benefit oneself."<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me that this was the way Reg lived. He was a real-life sermon on Paul's words.

And how we miss him. How we do, and will, miss those many expressions of love. We could spend days and weeks telling the stories of how God's love, living in Reg, touched our

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<sup>1</sup> *No Man is an Island*, New York: Harcourt, Jovanovich, Brace, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians" in *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. X, Nashville: Abingdon, 2002, p945.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 956-957.

lives. Reg's untimely death is a terrible loss for us. We weep for all that would have been with him. And God weeps with us in our grief.

In the church, we believe God is in the business of redemption. We would never say that God caused or intended for Reg's life to be cut short. What happened to him was a terrible, tragic, awful accident. An accident that forever alters the life of his family, his friends, and the person who hit him. The Christian tradition says that God can bring good even out of the most horrific events. The good news of the gospel is that God's life and love is the last word. The suffering and loss, the death and pain we know now are not the end of the story. Even when all we feel is the grief and loss—when we wonder how we will ever patch our lives back together—the Spirit prays in us and through us—groaning with us when all we feel is emptiness—the Spirit is at work within us even when there are no words left to express our sorrow.

Even in our sorrow, we give thanks that just as God claimed Reg as God's own beloved child in baptism, so too does God claim Reg as God's own beloved child in death. When Reg was baptized he began a life-long journey of faith. In his baptism, Reg was clothed with Christ, and in his death, his baptism is complete. As Christ was resurrected, so too is Reg raised to eternal life.

We take comfort in the words from the *Brief Statement of Faith*, "In life and in death, we belong to God." There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God, Paul tells us, nothing in this life and nothing in death. Reg has been received into God's eternal arms and today is praising God face to face.

And don't you just wonder if part of Reg's praise is cycling through fall colors on country roads, or scaling a high heavenly mountain peak or perhaps he's in the kitchen whipping up a chocolate truffle torte with raspberry puree and crème anglaise for the angels after choir practice?

Paul's chapter in Romans speaks to us of hope. Hope when life seems bleak. Hope for those who follow the Great Shepherd into the valley of the shadow of death. A valley in which we need fear no evil. Even when all seems lost, the Shepherd who leads us, who knows the name of each of the sheep and who calls us by name, is trustworthy. We are loved by the One whose love will follow us all the days of our life.<sup>4</sup>

Being loved by the [God who made heaven and earth], we become truly human beings in sharing that love. The love of God is the deepest truth in the cosmos and to trust this love is to open ourselves to a richer and fuller humanness—suffering included—than one would ever know, and to share in the loving liberation and remaking of the universe itself.<sup>5</sup>

We saw and experienced that in Reg. And our lives have a tear in them with his death that will be a long time mending. But God is in the business of mending and so we stitch our lives back together with the thread of this trembling truth: In life and in death we belong to God. In his life and in his death, Reg Smith belongs to God. In our living and in our dying, we too belong to God.

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<sup>4</sup> N.T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans" in *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. X, Nashville: Abingdon, 2002, p615.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p618.

The legacy Reg leaves with us is a legacy of loving others, of giving of himself for the well-being of people near and far. And I dare say that is the most significant legacy any of us can leave behind—no matter if our lives are cut short or if we get to live to see 100. The greatest legacy is to accept life as God’s great gift, not because of what it gives us, but because of what it enables us to give to others.

And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. The greatest of these is love.