

ALIVE AND WELL

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
September 9, 1984

Romans 12:9-17

My friends ask, "Now that you have been in Palo Alto a year, how is it going?" The Conference is curious. We are asked, "How are things in Palo Alto First?" How would you answer? I feel we are alive and well! Our church is alive and well.

Thanks to Kay Anderson, we are defining "live" as Love Is Vital Energy. An alive Christian is one who loves--dynamically and actively. An alive church is one which loves--where the Spirit, energy, is felt and expressed. That is happening here. Last Sunday a young adult worshipped with us and received Communion. She hadn't been to church in years. She had several unhappy experiences in churches and consequently had dropped out. She left last Sunday saying, "I really feel uplifted. I'm a changed person." Not only the service inspired her, but she was warmed and gratified by the greetings she received from you on the patio. We are making people feel welcome and wanted.

We are growing. Our attendance is increasing. Last Sunday, on traditionally low Labor Day weekend, we had 306 persons in worship, compared to 270 one year ago and 195 two years ago. Our finances are in good shape. We have survived the traditionally low summer months in grand style. In fact, our income through August in 1984 is up \$31,000 over the same period in 1983. Our Sunday School and youth programs are healthy; our choirs are growing. Yes, we are alive and well.

Now, we have a choice, don't we. When something of consequence has been achieved, when a plateau is reached after a long, steady climb, a choice must be made. Shall we sit and rest on this plateau, erect a tent, build a fire, prepare to settle in, enjoy the view, be content with the view even though it is so much more magnificent on the next plateau? Or, shall we climb on to the next plateau? Shall we expend the effort, deep breathe, exercise, make the commitment to reach heights unknown? To climb further will require a larger budget, more staff, more maintenance, increased giving to missions. Or, a third choice: shall we turn around and go back down the hill?

Individual lives have similar choices. Haven't you experienced in your own life the need to make choices--whether to push on and upward; or to be content with what you have and what you are; or, thirdly, to revert?

It is an interesting phenomenon, but when an effort has been made, when a new plateau has been reached, when the Spirit of God is moving, then comes the pressure to resist. There is opposition. Call it the Devil or Satan. Or, call it inertia (the force that slows, that resists movement). Call it decay or deterioration (the process of tearing down which is always much faster than the process of building up). The process of resistance is strong. The power of deterioration is tempting. Operation Setback is popular. The pull to fall back down the hill, to revert, is powerful.

It is timely that today, when we kick off the fall program, we are challenged to commit ourselves to love. Enclosed in your bulletin is a paper red brick. You are asked to sign it, committing yourself to love, and take it to the patio after the service where the youth have erected a paper yellow road. You are asked to kneel, or ask someone to kneel for you, and glue your red brick to the yellow road, thereby joining our bricks together to symbolize our unity in the love of God, love for God, and love for one another. What does it mean to commit yourself to love?

First, love is vital energy. Love is dynamic, alive--a moving, changing force. Love is not stagnant, stale, inert. Love is energy--effort, involvement, conscious action.

Love is the force that will eliminate negative thinking and living. Isn't negative thinking a major tool of the Devil to disrupt, disturb and destroy? The Devil whispers in your ear, "You might have had some victories, you might have come a long way, you might have some success, but you can't make it...You can't do it...You can't climb to the next plateau...Forget it...Come back down here where you belong." The old Devil says to us as a church, "It won't work...Your success won't last...We tried it once before...Never work...Costs too much, look at the budget they want... You can't depend on people, they'll let you down." The old Devil tries to separate and divide, whispering, "Don't trust that person...Think the worst of the other person's motives...What are they trying to get out of it?...Who does she think she is?...pull her down...put him down...destroy...divide...destruct."

Negative thinking is a powerful weapon. Resistance, setback, can only be handled by the Spirit of God, activated by you and me committing ourselves to Christ, committing ourselves to love. Love is vital energy. Will you expend the effort, commit the energy to love consciously in all situations, to change negative thinking to positive, affirmative actions? Aren't those magnificent words: positive affirmative action.

Secondly, love is vital energy to do what? What is love? It has been defined ad nauseum. It is used so loosely in our society to describe everything from goosebumps to a taste for chocolate. When we are called to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, what are we being called to do? One of the best definitions I've read is offered by Dr. M. Scott Peck in his book, The Road Less Traveled. He defines love as "The will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." To love is to act in such a manner that you or the other person or our church may grow spiritually, may grow in faith, self-confidence, grow to be more as God intended. Love is the expression of concern for the well-being of the other.

Love does not mean to let someone walk all over you, exploit you or manipulate you. A loving person is not weak, spineless, wishy-washy, wimpy. To love means to help persons and churches live up to their word, face their responsibilities, grow to maturity, live their lives to the fullest in faith and obedience to God.

Love does mean that you eliminate negative thinking and will put the best connotations on the other person's behavior, will think the best of that person, thereby allowing that person to live up to your expectations, to be the best that person can be. Love builds up and does not tear down. Love fortifies, not buries. Next week I will discuss the difference between judging and warning, criticizing and evaluating.

Where do we find such love? How can we develop the resources to love with vital energy? It can't be drummed up from inside us. It can't be forced. The source of such love, the well, the reservoir from which such love can be drawn, is God. On the patio where you will place your red brick, you will notice that the road begins with the heart of God. It is God's love from which we receive the love to which we commit ourselves. The sum total of all our commitments then creates a church, the kind of church Jesus died to create, the kind of church needed to reach yet another plateau.

I John 4:10 gives us the proper sequence. Let me paraphrase by substituting the phrase "vital energy" for the word "love." In this is love or vital energy, not that we are able to offer vital energy to God, not that we are able to drum up vital energy from within ourselves, but vital energy first comes to us from God who for all time demonstrated and revealed that vital energy through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Beloved, now that you have received vital energy from God, share it with others. Love, therefore, is vital energy, derived from God and expressed so that yourself, others and our church may grow spiritually.

Thirdly, make the decision to love. Love is a choice. You can choose to love or not to love. To choose to love requires energy, time; conscious and deliberate actions and work. Billy Sunday, the famous evangelist, was once preaching about going to heaven. A man asked him, "What must I do to go to Hell?" Billy Sunday immediately replied, "Nothing." That's right. Resistance, setbacks, decay, deterioration, reverting to former times happens without any effort on our part. That's the nature of sin. To overcome and reach the next plateau requires conscious, deliberate action. A defeated candidate remarked after the election, "I had the solid support of all those good people who did not go to the polls." Doing nothing results in defeat.

Our church has now reached a plateau where we are alive and well. Now, what is required is conscious will, attention, energy and commitment on our parts to keep it alive and well, and to grow. Will you commit yourself to love?

Our Epistle lesson this morning says it better than I. Romans 12:9-11. "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation (don't give in, don't quit), be constant in prayer."

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