

Jon Hauerwas – February 3, 2019 – “These Three”
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

I have never studied Spanish, and I don't know much of it. But, I have traveled to Honduras on three, separate occasions. The first time I was in college. I can still remember riding in a 12-passenger van while the driver rocked out to pop music on the local radio station. A bi-lingual student in our group leaned over to me, and told me to pay attention to the phrase “mi corazon.” “It comes up in nearly every song,” he added. I began listening selectively for that phrase, and was soon hearing it over and over again, in song after song.

Translated into English, “mi corazon” means “my heart.” And this concept signified the musicians' intention to communicate their feelings – their passion – to all within earshot. This is nothing new, of course. Sculptors, poets, and musicians have been doing this for ages. So that, today, even love, itself, is primarily described as a matter of feelings. We say, for instance, that we fall in love. But if we can fall in love, then it is reasonable to suggest that we could, at some point, fall out of love, as well. This is the danger of love as feeling. Such love is fleeting, ultimately as interchangeable as the next top 40 hit.

Paul, on the other hand, argues that love abides. That it never ends. That love is eternal. What he's really talking about here is not a feeling, at all, but a habit – a learned pattern of behavior that must be cultivated over time in the context of the Christian community that supports and encourages faithful action.¹ In other words, Paul is trying to promote the formation of character among Jesus' disciples, and to “make unconditional lovers out of otherwise selfish human beings.”²

Now, I imagine that most of us have convinced ourselves that we are typically selfless people. If, for instance, I wanted to make the case for myself, then I could cite ten mission trips, a year of my life working with the homeless, and three years of seminary with the intention of doing something worthwhile in the world. I could talk about my efforts to tutor those in the inner city or hundreds of visits to the homebound and hospitalized.

But, if I am to be honest, any illusions that I may have crafted about the selfless nature of my life were put to rest following the birth of my first child. Soon, I experienced the sleepless nights. The lack of free time. The loss of control over my own schedule. “The Wheels on the Bus” played on constant repeat in the car. And

¹ Richard B. Hayes, *First Corinthians, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: 2011), 232.

² Ed. Joel B. Green, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 1*. (Westminster John Knox Press: 2018), 218.

on the TV, I saw endless visions of Barney, the purple dinosaur, even when he wasn't on the screen.

As the runny noses and dirty diapers piled up, I realized that caring for a tiny human's daily needs had taken a significant toll upon me. I felt utterly naïve, completely clueless, and thoroughly depleted. While I loved my child emotionally and cognitively, being a dad was more effort than I ever could have imagined. I was learning that character formation is a two-way street. For just as he was being shaped and molded, I was being shaped and molded, as well.

There is a documentary film that has gained notoriety over the past year. *Three Identical Strangers* has now been nominated for 41 awards, winning 10 thus far. The premise involves tracing the life stories of triplets who were adopted in infancy by three, different families in an effort to draw conclusions about the ongoing relationship between nature and nurture. How much of our life is rooted in biology, and how much is associated with the environment in which we were raised?

As the documentary unfolds, we learn that all three of the boys developed mental health issues in high school. And a question lingers about the birth family's history of mental illness. Even so, the severity of those issues varied from one child to the next. In the first adoptive family, the father was a physician and the mother

was an attorney. The father was often absent for work. And though he was loving, he also had a distant, cerebral personality.

The second child was adopted by a stay at home mother and a father who worked as an educator. The father was extremely strict and authoritarian. He and the child often clashed. The mood at home was tense. And, ultimately, the child was diagnosed as a manic-depressive.

The third child was adopted into a family in which the parents had no formal higher education. They were immigrant shop keepers, and did not speak English at home. But the father was also the most warm and compassionate of the three adoptive fathers. When the boys were introduced to one another at age 19, this father became the one who provided immediate cohesion to the group. All of the boys had a nickname for him and all bonded with him naturally.

In our second lesson, Paul's message is in keeping with the film, as he encourages us to live and act more compassionately. "We must learn patience," he reminds us. And "we must be taught how not to keep score of wrongs done against us."³ In time, I have certainly learned more about what it means to be a father. And with that experience, I pray that I am getting better at loving my children. Like any

³ *Ibid.*, 232.

parent, I want my own sons to become well adjusted, resilient, and kind. I want them to have all of the tools that they need to succeed in this world. And I'm reminded, almost daily, of how much humility this requires.

Because love, as Paul reminds us, is really about service. Therefore, "our jealous, boastful, arrogant, and rude selves must die, as Paul died on the road to Damascus. Our selves full of our selves must be emptied, even as Christ emptied himself and took the form of a servant."⁴ In losing ourselves, we will gain the character that can shape young minds, and build community, and earnestly spread the good news of the gospel.

And, one day, we may even be wise enough to put this journey in perspective. For while it seemed, at first, that the needs of others initially had slowed our progress on other fronts, willingly handing our lives over to them was the most important work of all. For faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.