

The Gospel According to Elmer's

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

July 26, 2009

(ORDINARY TIME, YR. B)

I therefore a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, for bearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

That's what God wants. He wants us to love. Because God knows -- God knows, mind you, what a difference it makes when we do. But let me tell you a little story about that...

You may not know this, but my mom is a healer. Really. She can heal other people. And I know what you're thinking ... "Of course. She's a nurse!" But that isn't it. There's more to it than that. Something she didn't learn in nursing school at Berea. It's more like a gift, I think. Paul mentions it there in 1 Corinthians 12. And my mother has it. My mother the nurse. Wayne County's version of Mayberry's Aunt Bea. She's a healer. She is. I've seen it myself. She can heal other people. Well ... maybe I should say **God** heals people through her. He binds up their wounds and makes them healthy and whole.

And not always with medicine, mind you. She uses it sometimes, I suppose. But not all that often. She uses her hands. And she uses her heart.

She might bake a lemon pie or one of her famous Italian Cream cakes for one of the neighbors. Or send a little note to someone who's "under the weather." Or she might call an old friend who's having a tough time. Or just sit and listen to someone who's hurting... She heals when she hugs them. When she puts her arms round them and tells them she loves them. And she

heals when she prays, and when she lets people know they are cared for and loved.

And I **know** this because it happened to me when I was a wee little boy. She'd bind up my wounds with Band-Aids and Bactine, and with cookies and milk and stories and hugs. I'd take a fall or come down with a cold or a bad case of the little boy blues. And my mom would set me up on her lap and she'd tell me some tale, or read from a book about Little Miss Muffet who sat on her tuffet, or Hansel and Gretel ... because we didn't *have* Sponge-Bob Square Pants back then. So we got *The Three Little Pigs*, and *Little Red Riding Hood* and some kid named *Jack* who climbed up a *beanstalk*. And my favorite was just a wee little story -- a rhyme, a few verses that all of you know...

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.

***All the king's horses and all the king's men
couldn't put Humpty together again.***

I'd sit there on her lap and as she read the story -- the little rhyme from the book -- I'd look at the pictures. And in the first picture Humpty Dumpty was sitting there on the wall. And he looked like an Egg -- a really big egg with skinny little arms and legs. And he was wearing a hat -- a big top hat, I think. And there on his face he was wearing a big, broad smile full of pearly white teeth. Just as happy as he could be. And then mom would turn the page -- when Humpty Dumpty fell down. And there he was on the ground. Just lying there broken. And the grin he was wearing had turned into a frown. Because all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.

It was sad, in a way, when Mom read the story. Because I knew how he felt. I mean, I knew all about that when I was a kid. Because it happened to me, once. For my favorite person in all the world -- besides my mom and dad and grandma Jones and Mitzi the beagle -- was my Uncle Stanley. He was my

mom's little brother. And he always wore blue jeans and a big cowboy hat. And he smoked a cigar. And he was always singing -- at least, I thought he was singing when I was a boy. But now that I'm older, I'm not so sure you could call that *singing*. But back then he would sing, "Tell Her Lies and Feed Her Candy," or "Thank God and Greyhound She's Gone." And he drove a little black convertible -- a Volkswagen bug. So he was just "it" as far as I was concerned. And I wanted to be just like him.

And that Christmas my Uncle Stanley gave me a present. I had seen it in the window at Mr. Queen's dime store in Wayne. And it was just what I wanted -- a little blue airplane. And that Christmas morning it was under the tree -- in a package to me from my favorite person in all the world.

And when I opened the package and saw what it was, I was like *Humpty Dumpty* on top of the wall, *on top of the world!* And I'm sure I was wearing a big toothy grin -- well at least, *partly* toothy. Because I was flying high with that little plane. And it lasted all day. From morning till evening I played with that airplane. And I was as happy as happy could be. ✕

But even little boys run out of gas and start losing speed. And I did. I did. I was just worn out. But before I landed there in my bunk bed, I took my blue airplane and I started to put it up on the bookshelf in my room. So that the very next morning, when I opened my eyes, that would be the first thing I'd see. So I lifted it up over my head. But I couldn't quite reach the top of the shelf. And the little blue airplane fell to the hard wood floor. And one of its wings was just broken off.

And all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put what was *in here* together again.

That night I frowned just like *Humpty Dumpty*. And I cried and cried until I fell asleep. But the very next morning, I opened my eyes, and there on the bookshelf was that little blue airplane, with *both* of its wings, ready to fly.

Because my mother, the healer, had fixed it with *glue*. She put what was broken together again. And whatever it was that'd been broken *in me* was mended and whole and together again.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

That's how it was with the people at Corinth. Something *inside* them got broken, somehow. And their church was divided. It was broken in two -- this church that they loved -- that meant *so much* to them. It was like Humpty Dumpty when he fell from the wall. Because there were people at Corinth, church people, mind you, who just couldn't agree. And it was a problem. It was splitting the church. Just tearing it apart. Because there were people at Corinth who chose Paul as their leader. But others said, "We follow Peter." And some other people were saying that Apollos was the one to follow. And they all said, of course, that the Lord was on *their* side.

And sadly, there were even bigger problems than that. Because some folks in the church were just jealous, I think. Or snooty or something. I mean, they were always criticizing other people. "Old so-and-so can't pray worth a hoot." Or, "She can't even speak in tongues." Or "What does *he* have to offer the church." But of course, they were perfect, they thought. "I know how to pray." Or, "I can preach. I can write. I can sing. I know more about these things... I've read Leviticus. Twice. And that makes me better *you*. That means, *I'm closer to God than you*." And it was a *problem*. I mean, you can imagine. It was splitting the church. Breaking it to pieces. Just like Humpty Dumpty when he fell from the wall.

And when Paul heard about it something in him was broken, as well. For, he may not have been one them (Corinth wasn't his home), but he *loved* them *all*, like a father, I think. So his heart was just breaking for them. And He wanted to come, I'm sure, and try to pick up the pieces and make them whole. But he couldn't. He was too far away. So, instead, he sat down and wrote a letter. And he reminded all of them that they were the *body of Christ*. **“And even though you are different,”** he told them, **“You are one church, one body, one family together.”**

And he talked about some of the problems they had there in Corinth -- about all of the blaming and jealousy there in the church. And he told them to look for the best in each other instead of the worst, and to seek the gifts of teaching and healing and leading and serving so they could *help* each other *be* the church God was calling them to be. And he said (It was a long letter, mind you) -- he said, **“If you really want to be the church God wants you to be, and if you really want to be the very body of Christ in that place, then let me show you the way.”** And this is what he said...

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but do not love, I might as well be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I can preach the most wonderful sermons, and know all of the answers to all of life's questions, and have enough faith to move any mountain, but do not have love, I am nothing at all. And even if I give away all that I have, and my whole life with it, but do not give love, I have gained nothing.

Oh, it's as if he was saying, “Look ... if you really want to be the body of Christ -- if you really want to be the Church there in Corinth, *this* is how you do it. You do it with love.” **For love is the one thing you have that can take what is broken and put the pieces together again.**

Wisdom (alone) can't do that. And neither can strength. Or knowledge. Or talent. Or skill. Those are things we all need, mind you. But the one thing we have that can heal what is broken and bind us together and help us be who

God calls us to be is greater by far than any of those. And that one thing is love.

That's what Paul said to the people at Corinth -- people who were broken and hurting and coming apart. He told them to love. To let love be their goal. But you and I know that that isn't easy. For **love is patient and kind. It doesn't boast or brag. And it doesn't get jealous. Love isn't resentful. And it doesn't rejoice when someone else is wrong...** At least, that's what Paul said in his letter.

But *most of us* have a hard time saying that about ourselves. I mean, try it sometime. Turn to that scripture -- 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7 -- and everywhere you see the word "love," read your name instead. If I did it would say ... **Tom is patient and kind. Tom is not jealous or boastful; he is not arrogant or rude. Tom does not insist on his own way; he is not irritable or resentful, he does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in what is right. Tom bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things...**

You see, it just doesn't fit. None of that is true. Not *all* the time. Not even *a lot* of the time. My name doesn't fit there. And I don't know any name that does. Except one. And that name is Jesus. For Jesus *is* patient and kind. He is *not* arrogant or rude. Jesus does not insist on his own way. He is not irritable or resentful. He *never* rejoices at the wrong, but only rejoices in what is right and good. Jesus bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things... It's the only name that fits. It's the only name that can fill the space where love belongs. And that's just the point. **Jesus is the only one who can fill that place in each of our lives and in our life together as the body of Christ.** ✠

I learned that for the first time, I think, when I was just a little boy. Something inside me was broken and shattered. And all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put it back together again. But *he* could and he did. Maybe not right away. But piece by piece, and bit by bit he healed what was broken. And the glue he used to bind it together came from the hearts and

hands of people who cared, people who loved. Like my grandmother, and Miss “Granny” Brumfield my Sunday School teacher, and Ron Brooks, my pastor, who spoke to you from this pulpit last Sunday. And he does it still through family and friends and through people who are part of the body of Christ. So even though my name doesn’t fit there, I can tell you that love makes a difference. Because I know what a difference it has made for me. It can take what is broken in each of our lives and put all the pieces together again.

But let me tell you one more little story about that just to show you what I mean. It’s a story I heard from a young preacher named Bobby. And Robert, his father, was a pastor, too, somewhere in California, I think...

When Bobby was a senior in High School, his mom and dad decided to go out for the evening. Just the two of them, mind you. A nice dinner and a movie. So they said, “Bobby, you’re in charge. We’re going out for the evening, so it’s your job to stay here and look after your sisters.” And they said, “We’ll be home around 9:30, but till then you’re in charge.” And then they left. They were gone. And Bob was in charge, at home with his two little sisters....

Well, at least that’s where his parents *thought* was. But he wasn’t, of course. I mean, you’ve heard about preacher’s kids. And it’s true, I know, because I’m married to one. Not to mention the other two preacher’s kids I happen to live with. So, anyway, when his mom and dad came home at 9:30 that evening, their two little girls were up past their bedtime watching TV. And Bob wasn’t there! And they were not feeling patient or kind. They were irritable and resentful and ready to blow! Just to think that their son would just run off and leave his little sisters there all alone ... after they *told* him to stay and take care of them!

So they said, “Where’s your brother?” And the girl’s said, “He’s at Cecil’s.” Cecil lived next door. So Bobby’s mom called Cecil. “Tell my son to come

home,” she said. But Cecil said, “Oh, he’s not here. I haven’t seen him tonight,” he said.

An hour later, Bobby came home. And when he walked through the door, his mom and dad were just sitting there waiting. And his mom said, “Oh, Robert ... you’re home. Where have you been?”

“Cecil needed some help with his homework, so I went over to help him,” he said. And she said, “Well, isn’t that interesting. I just talked to young Cecil and he said he hasn’t seen you.... Where have you been?” And he swallowed hard, looked down at his shoes, and in a still, small voice that could barely be heard, Bobby said, “I was at Linda’s.” His girlfriend. Who did not live next door or even on the same block.

His father had been sitting there quietly, drinking a cup of tea. But when he heard that, he stood up. And he threw the tea cup down on the floor. And it just shattered. And he pointed to it and said, “There son. That’s what you’ve done to our trust in you.” And that was it. That’s all he said. But it was enough. It was more than enough. Bobby said that when his dad shattered that tea cup it shattered his heart. Because this was his father. His dad. A gentle giant he looked up to and loved with all his heart. And he wanted so much for his father to be able to trust him and respect him and be proud of him. “But it was gone,” he said. “I had broken his trust. And I had broken his heart.”

His parents turned and walked out of the room. And when they did, Bobby got down on his hands and knees. And he gathered up all the broken pieces and carried them back to his room. And he tried his best to put all the pieces together again and glue them in place. He worked on it for hours. Everyday after school he’d go straight to his room and work on that teacup. And when it was finally finished, he carried it to his father. And he handed it to him. And trying his best to choke back the tears and the guilt and the shame, he said, “Here Dad, I know it doesn’t look like much. But I think it will hold water

now.” And his father loved him and hugged him and held him with tears streaming down his face. And Bob said that whatever it was that was broken inside him and whatever it was that was broken between them was put back together again. And the glue that held it together was love -- his love for his father and his father’s love for him.

I don’t know what’s broken in your life. In your heart. Or your soul. Or your relationship with others. I only know that love makes a difference -- that Jesus makes a difference. The kind of difference we *all* need so much ... and the kind of difference we need in our world.

I therefore a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, for bearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, ObLSB



