



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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**Sermon: June 14, 2009**

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### **The Unique Character of Christ's Love, Robert B. Culp**

1 Corinthians 13

When I was growing up, we had our hometown newspaper, The Punxsutawney Spirit, that kept us apprised of all the news, both local and global, with the global news, of course, assigned to page two. I think that owning a small-town newspaper requires a rather deft touch. For if your report everything that happens, townspeople won't talk to you, or will stop advertising in your pages, or will stop subscribing entirely. After-all, you have to be mindful of reputations, some more than others.

One of the members of my father's church in Punxsy was Audrey Bidwell, and she authored a regular column entitled something like "The Talk of the Town." She was always very deferential in terms of highlighting the positive accomplishments of area residents – reporting that Fred Bailer was chosen the Rotary Boy of the Month, or that Regina Limerick had won first place in the DAR's contest for best patriotic speech, or that Bill Means has been recognized as the town's Volunteer of the Year. Where there were special awards given and achievements recognized, Audrey did a first-class job in passing on appropriate kudos and congratulations, using first and last names.

But in the "Courtroom News" or "Police Log" items, Audrey would forego the full names of individuals, and she would use only their initials. She was very proper that way. I confess that it was a lot less interesting, but I suppose it made for a more peaceful community. As someone has noted, "Denial does a thriving business in most small towns."

Parenthetically, when Kathy and I moved here ten years ago, we were rather shocked to read the Police Blotter in the local newspapers. Not only were we able to read the full names of all those for whom there were domestic disturbances, break-ins, arrests and citations, but we also discovered the names of those who were caught speeding along such places as Lake Avenue and Round Hill Road. I cannot tell you the mortal fear I have endured over the last decade that some day you would find my name among the speeding perpetrators who were caught!

At any rate, if you wanted the real news in Punxsutawney, what you needed to do was to visit the card rack at McLaughlin's Rexall Drugstore on Main Street. It was the only card rack in town when I was growing up. So anyone who wanted to make amends to someone they hurt, or to woo someone to whom they were attracted, or to convey congratulations or condolences to loved ones would inevitably find themselves at McLaughlin's Rexall, pouring over the meager offering of poetry and prose. They would do so under the

watchful gaze Bud Dunkle, the town's pharmacist. An observant town resident could learn a great deal by noticing the cards people bought.

I was there one day when Sam Hooper walked in and began to browse the cards in the "I'm Sorry" section. Over the next couple of months, I kept an eye turned toward the Hooper situation, as they were parishioners of my father and Nancy Hooper had taught my fifth grade Sunday School class years before. Sure enough, Sam and Nancy got a divorce, which was a rarity back then. In the "Talk of the Town" Audrey discreetly wrote "S.H. and N.H. – Dissolution of Marital Vows." A number of people were surprised by this development, but somehow I had known all along that something was amiss. For men like Sam didn't buy "I'm Sorry" cards unless things had gone desperately wrong!

But the card rack is also a pretty good place to find out what's happening on the budding romance front. Even though it was some years later, and the card rack was in Palmer's Drugstore in New Martinsville WV, and the observant detective was none other than my father, dad discovered this truth as well. Dad was a born "people-person" who never met a stranger in his life. As I have shared with you before, whenever we ate out in a restaurant, dad would pepper the waitress with a barrage of questions from the time she would arrive to greet us, and by the time our desserts would come, we would know her life history ... and probably the names of her children and pets!

Well, dad once told me a "card-rack story" that has stuck with me through the years. Johnny and his wife Ida lived down the street from mom and dad and would pass their summer evenings on their front porch swing. Johnny was retired from the Mobay plant up the Ohio River, and Ida still worked part-time in the school system as a nurse. They had a son and a daughter, both of them married and living close by. No grandchildren yet, though Ida and Johnny dropped all kinds of hints and were hoping. But then Ida came down with cancer, left home one day for the hospital in Wheeling, and she never came back.

Johnny was devastated ... empty inside and utterly lost. He took to sitting inside, watching TV and eating TV dinners. After a while, dad said, he even stopped going to church where he had served as an usher for many years, and gave up his special pew. I remember my father remarking that when you've been sharing a pew with your beloved for 35 years, sitting by yourself on a Sunday morning can hold a pain we can scarcely imagine.

After a few months, Johnny's daughter waded in and took charge. She drove him to the doctor for a check-up, signed him up for Meals-on-Wheels, and persuaded a gym instructor from the high school to work with him twice a week with some simple exercises.

The next Monday a volunteer stopped by his house with a hot meal and a warm smile. Ruthie was her name. She was 62 years old, had a big heart with energy to burn, and was a very kind and sensitive spirit. Johnny came to the door in a worn sweatshirt, paint-splotted jeans, and house slippers. Ruthie carried the meal inside, sat Johnny down at the table, laid out the silverware, handed him a napkin, and patted his shoulder. "There, there," she told him. "It gets a little easier each day." Ruthie was the voice of experience, having lost her own husband a couple of years earlier. She just sat with him for a few moments, and then patted him again on the shoulder and left.

This continued for some time, three days a week, and by the next summer, Johnny was answering the door in a new shirt, khaki slacks, and shiny loafers. And Ruthie, not too surprisingly, was staying all the way through dessert.

My father told me that he found all this out from Johnny himself, down at Palmer's Drugstore by the card rack. Dad was there to buy an anniversary card for mom, when Johnny came over to survey the "I Love You" cards that were there. Dad said they stood there shoulder to shoulder, two 65-year-olds, both of them searching for just the right card to convey their affections for their loved ones. After a while, they wished each other well and continued their card-searching until they each found exactly what they were looking for.

In the months that followed, dad said that Johnny started to come back to church, though he was sitting in a different pew and was accompanied every week by Ruthie whose eyes were twinkling and sparkling.

Johnny and Ruthie were married for eight years, and they delivered Meals-on-Wheels together almost every week, in addition to attending church services and ushering on a regular basis. Then one wintry night Johnny died in his sleep. Dad told me that Ruthie continued to deliver Meals-on-Wheels, while Johnny rests at the Northview Cemetery next to his beloved Ida ... which was Ruthie's idea.

Oddly enough, it was a bachelor named Paul who wrote some of the truest words about love which I shared earlier with you this morning: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way ... it does not rejoice in wrong-doing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. When all else has fallen, love still stands." My father, who was a Presbyterian minister, intoned those very words at Johnny and Ruthie's wedding, and dad said that it appeared to him that Ruthie certainly took them to heart.

You see, love is not merely something we believe, have, keep, or give. Rather, love is something we do, and in its doing, love shows forth works. The world itself is a work of God's love. Marriage is a work of love done by those committed to perfect the love that has brought them together. Children are the work of the love of their parents. Forgiveness is a work of love that somehow unites in understanding those who somehow have become estranged. Deeds of justice, faithful efforts in the making of peace, and daring to speak truth to power are all works of love, and as such they are provisional and courageous demonstrations of the Kingdom of God for which we labor and pray each day.

Love is the supreme virtue, because by understanding and accepting us as we are ... faults, foibles, and all ... it has the capacity to effect in us a dramatic transformation that will sustain us long after the fresh blush of enthusiasm will have passed. Peter Gomes is convinced that what our generation of young people most desires to know is the love of God and the love of family and friends. He writes, "I believe that the young are tired of the vulgar ubiquity of the cheap and sensational substitutes for love, and long for the real thing. They know that love, which is the real thing, is capable of sustaining every shock and tribulation known to this tired old planet, including things past, things present, and things to come."

Indeed.

What do you and I want when everything seems to be turning to dust and ashes? What do we yearn for perhaps more than anything else? We want something that is patient and kind, not arrogant or rude, not irritable or resentful, but that rejoices in the right. We yearn for something that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things ... something that still stands when all else has fallen.

We hunger and thirst to experience and embody the incarnational love of God that we know in Christ.

Let us pray:

Dear God, help us not only to understand the depth and breadth of the love you have for us in Jesus our Lord, but also to enfold that love in our daily lives. May we come to experience and share first-hand the virtues

of Christ's love in us and for us which includes constancy and concern, reliability and patience, understanding and grace, generosity and trustworthiness, helpfulness and modesty and peacemaking. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.