

“Overflowing with love”

I Corinthians 13:1-8

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This morning we light the Advent Candle of Love. Love comes to us in a wide variety of ways. There are stories of love, poems of love, pictures of love, songs of love, gestures of love, and tokens of love. What a wonderful opportunity we have before us in these few moments to devote our thoughts completely to love. There was a Presbyterian minister who devoted his life to love, and in turn he was a beloved figure...not just within the Presbyterian church, but to an entire generation who listened and learned from his lessons. This Presbyterian minister was not identified by the robe he wore, but instead by a distinctive article of clothing he would put on each time he addressed his national audience. In honor of this Presbyterian minister, who is none other than Mr. Rogers, I am going to remove my robe and put on that distinctive article of clothing for which he was so well known. Then I am going to have a little chat with you. My goal in this little chat is not to exhaust the symbols of love, but rather to encourage you to join with me in remembering and recounting the symbols of love God has placed in our lives.

Like Mr. Rogers who wore his comfortable sweater and spoke to children, I am going to use some objects to help tell these stories. I have a big container filled with various objects that have helped me experience some of the many ways love can be shared with others. I am going to begin with something near and dear to my heart...and...near and dear to my stomach. It is a casserole dish. This church knows a thing or two about casserole dishes. How many Swiss chicken dinners have been put into casserole dishes and shared at the Warm Center? Each of those casserole dishes is a symbol of love. But today I am thinking of a different casserole, not the Swiss chicken. Some of you have made so many Swiss chicken casseroles you might not be aware there are other variations.

I learned about this particular casserole through a Ted Talk, a short presentation that captures something interesting or important in life.

Often a Ted Talk comes from a person's own life experience. Several months ago, I saw that a friend of ours from California was giving a Ted Talk about a tater tot casserole. I performed the marriage for this woman and her husband more than 25 years ago. The combination of a dear friend speaking and the topic having anything to do with tater tots was too much to resist. I cued up the video and leaned in to hear something fun and enticing about a tater tot casserole. Well, true to the title the message was about a tater tot casserole. But the recipe for her Ted Talk surprised me because it included some difficult and painful ingredients. My friend told how her son, at the age of 15, started to harm himself as a way of dealing with stress. He eventually became suicidal. The tater tots came into play when she said, "No one brought us a tater tot casserole when our son was struggling." All through her life, her experience had been when people struggled, someone would bring a tater tot casserole, as a sign of concern and support and love. But now in her time of need, no one brought her a tater tot casserole. And then she said, with a vulnerability that was deep and filled with heartache, she said no one brought a casserole because no one knew. And no one knew because she was afraid of sharing the struggle her family and her son were facing. Her plea, in this powerful talk, was to let people know the challenges you face, and particularly, in terms of depression or mental illness, not to let any stigma keep you from reaching out. She finally broke down with a friend, she finally shared the struggle, and she allowed people in. And guess what? As soon as she let people know about her struggle, and her son's struggle, the casseroles started pouring in. Love is patient, love is kind, and sometimes love is a casserole that fills your tummy, that warms your heart, and that lets you know you have someone in your life who cares for you and will be there for you.

Next, I would like to show you a special envelope. The envelope is an ordinary offering envelope, the kind many of you use as you make your generous donations to church. This envelope doesn't represent a particularly large gift, but like the story in Luke where a woman's gift of a small coin catches the attention of Jesus, this envelope represents one of hundreds of envelopes that caught my attention. One of my most cherished moments during worship is when the kids come forward and I

get to spend a few minutes talking with them about God. Every one of the children God has given us to shepherd and care for holds a special place in our hearts. Having a chance to tell them a story, ask some questions, try to figure out how God is working in our lives, those moments are priceless. I always look forward to the Sunday mornings when one particular friend is in worship. Her name is Addie. Without fail, Addie brings me an offering envelope, just like this one. They always have a fun message, something like, “I love it when you smile.” That makes my day right there. But along with the sweet messages, every envelope always has a one-dollar bill.

Over the years, whenever Addie gave an envelope, I would stuff it into the desk in my office. When COVID hit, I was rummaging through my desk. I found the place where I had stuffed Addie’s envelopes. During COVID, there was not much to do at the office, as everyone was in quarantine. I started opening all Addie’s envelopes. By the time I was done there were 139 one-dollar bills. All given by a sweet young girl with a heart of gold. Each envelope reminded me that Jesus was so pleased and so impressed with the widow who gave just a mite, but whose little mite was a really big gift. Love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud, and sometimes love is found in a tiny offering envelope in the form of a one-dollar bill that comes from the generous heart of a child.

In my love container I have all the makings of a dress. Before COVID hit we had a faithful group of sewists who would gather monthly on Saturdays and make things for others who were in need. They made quilts for a project called Quilts Beyond Borders. These quilts were for children in need, especially orphans living in under-served areas of the world where the warmth of a quilt is needed at night. More than 153 million children in our world today have lost one or both parents. Quilts Beyond Borders has delivered thousands of quilts around the world. The Dress A Girl Around the World project makes sundresses that are sent all around the world. We are one part of a ministry that has made 500,000 dresses that have been sent to 82 different countries. Some teenagers have helped make Small Kennel Quilts with a project that makes quilts for animal shelters. We have also given quilts to

refugee families arriving from Syria and people in North Carolina recovering from hurricanes. Love does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, and when creative hands sew and quilt love becomes a sundress for a young girl, a quilt to comfort, and a covering for man's best friend.

I really like what I am about to show you now. In my hand I have a hand. One of the talented members of our congregation heard about a group that was making prosthetic hands and arms for people from around the world who could not afford a traditional prosthetic. These "homemade" prosthetics are made for the cost of around seventy dollars. Bob Rieger went home from church that day, learned about the process of using a 3D printer, bought a 3D printer, assembled it, learned how to make prosthetics, and has this to say about what has happened in his life since he got involved in lending others a hand.

By learning 3D printing, assembling my printer, gaining skill at fabricating prostheses and becoming extremely active with e-NABLE, God has used me to forward his kingdom...I have made many online friends with e-NABLE, friends from all over the world. I will probably never meet most of them in person, yet we communicate on almost a daily basis encouraging each other Ahmad in Aleppo, Syria...Sandra and Everton in Brazil...James in Thailand...Shawn in Washington State...Thierry in France...Lars in Germany...Jeremy and Jon here in Chicago and Rochester...all of these friends and colleagues who are working to help people in need. We spend our own time, talents, and financial resources, which, after all, are all gifts from God."

Bob shared about correspondence he received a while back from a man in Kenya. Describing his wife's need for a prosthetic the man tells how his wife was amputated in 2005. Since then, they have tried many ways to enable the wife to be fitted with a hand. Their previous efforts had been unsuccessful. They wrote to Bob, "We wish to kindly ask if we can find assistance. Be assured our prayers and thanks will accompany anything you can do in this regard. My wife and I have two children aged 15 and 11. We lost our eldest child in the shootout that also took my wife's hand. May God bless your worthy cause. Samuel is my name. My wife is Salome. Thanks very much and looking forward to your feedback."

What a worthy effort. What a way to lend a helping hand. But this particular project for Samuel's wife was complicated, requiring an advanced arm and hand which was still in an experimental phase. The project was beyond the scope of Bob's 3D printer. Bob said, "So I just ordered a larger printer." Love does not dishonor others, and for Bob Rieger and all the good folks at e-NABLE, love is truly lending a helping hand to those in need.

During the winter months we set up the Mitten Tree and invite you to bring mittens, gloves, socks, sweaters, scarves, and coats to help those who struggle with the cold of winter. When we lived in Houston there was a man confined to a wheelchair who sold newspapers. Every day he would get dropped off at a busy intersection. When people stopped at the traffic light, he would offer them a paper for a dollar. One day Houston was hit with a cold front. No one in Houston is prepared for cold weather, and that man in his wheelchair was especially unprepared. Cars were driving by, he was shivering and still trying to sell his papers when a person got out of one of the cars. I was watching this unfold. The person walked up to the man in the wheelchair. I wasn't sure what was going to take place. But the person proceeded to unzip his coat, take it off, hand it to the man in the wheelchair, help him into the coat, and then the man got back in his car and headed on his way. It was a touching scene of what love looks like. What made it even more special is the man who did it was a member of our church. He didn't know I was watching, but I went home and told my family, "Love is David sharing his coat with the man in the wheelchair who sells newspapers."

I have something else from Houston that reminds me of love. It is a grapefruit. A grapefruit is not unique to Houston, but my memory of a grapefruit is. Roy and Ellen were an elderly couple by the time we moved to Houston. Not long after I got to know them Roy came in and told me Ellen had Alzheimer's. You could see the sadness in his eyes. He kept her at home until he just couldn't provide for her needs. Then he settled her in a wonderful home down in Sugarland, about 30 minutes from our church. Every day Roy would drive down to see Ellen. Every day. He would sit with her. She lost her words. She became incontinent. She lost her ability to recognize her loved ones. And still Roy would go

every day. Well, Ellen loved grapefruit. And because Ellen loved grapefruit, this dear man named Roy would bring his wife a grapefruit, cut it into small pieces, and feed her little by little. It was almost like it was the last vestige of a relationship that was slowly dying. But for Roy it was not the last vestige of a relationship that was slowly dying? He knew better. That relationship was not dying, because as the bible tells us, "Love never fails". If you ever saw the kindness and concern Roy showed Ellen, you would understand what I mean when I say love is a grapefruit.

This is not my first visit with you as Mr. Rogers, although most of you were not here the last time I put on this comfortable sweater. In fact, none of you human beings were here the last time I sweatered up. But some of the teddy bears were here. The first time I wore this sweater was early on during the days of COVID. No humans were here, but I brought all the teddy bears to the , and I preached my sermon to them that day. We sometimes have 30 or so teddy bears, but even the bears had low attendance that day I preached to them. There were only seven teddy bears. Goodness gracious. Even the bears were hiding out. Actually, the bears that were not in worship that day were doing exactly what they were supposed to be doing. The teddy bears that did not join me the last time I put on my Mr. Rogers sweater were all out on assignment. The bears are not meant to stay here in church. Each bear has a little prayer tag, and when you know someone who is facing a sadness or a sorrow, we hope you will take a bear and give it to that person. Let them know they are being prayed for. You all had been doing a great job passing out those bears to people in need. That is why there were only seven bears when I put on my Presbyterian preacher sweater during the early days of COVID.

That morning I told the bears where many of their friends were. It was a very touching morning. I told the bears about a young man whose liver was not working the way it should. He was very sick. His family was worried about him. His family was praying for him. This young man's grandmother is a member of our church. She has helped many people when they have had sad times. After this young man's grandmother asked us to pray for her grandson, she reached out and

picked up one of our bears and she took him to her grandson. Her grandson lives in Massachusetts. Her grandson in Massachusetts was able to hold his little teddy bear close to his heart and know that we were praying for him.

I also shared the story of a bear who went all the way to Missouri to be with a young mother who lost her baby due to a miscarriage. Even though that mommy was really sad, she wrote back to our church and said, "I treasure the bear that was sent to me after I suffered a loss." She even put a little  Then she told us that when her mother-in-law got sick, her mother-in-law received a bear, and every time her mother-in-law went back and forth to the hospital for chemotherapy, her little bear traveled with her! When I think of that little bear sitting by the side of a woman on her trips back and forth to chemotherapy, it reminds me that love always protects.

We received a picture of one of our bears who made a big trip to the west, to Phoenix, Arizona. A young woman's mother became very sick with the Coronavirus. Her mother had to be on a ventilator for 27 days. Thankfully the mother recovered. After the young woman opened her package with a teddy bear, she wrote to us and said, "Thank you very much for this 'Bear Hug' that came all the way from Rhode Island." And she sent a picture of her teddy bear. The bear in that picture had the same sign on its tummy that all of our teddy bears have when they travel to be with people during their difficult times.

"This cuddly friend has sat among the Congregation of Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian in Westerly, Rhode Island. It has heard the Word read, prayers prayed, songs of praises sung, testimony given, and the sermon preached. It has been given love and has loved others. Now it comes to you with the blessings of worship, love and the prayers of our congregation."

You might have noticed we have more than seven bears in our church now. You might also have noticed most of the bears are all dressed up for Christmas. Now I love to see the bears coming to church, but what we really would love to see is the bears leaving the church, carried out in your arms, and delivered to someone who could really use

the gift of love this Christmas. Do you know anyone who could use the gift of love this Christmas?

A few weeks ago, one of our members, a dear friend named Dorothy, carried a bear out of church. Later that day a family of three, a daddy who has served in our military, a mommy, and a three-year-old child, were given the keys to their new home. Many of you from our church helped to restore that Habitat for Humanity home. Dorothy was there for the dedication of the home, and when she left, she left a beautiful bear for the family to have, so they would know they are being prayed for.

There is a bear that has returned to our church. Do you remember I told you about the young man whose liver was not working, the young man whose grandmother gave him a teddy bear? That young man ended up receiving a liver transplant, and he is on the road to recovery. Guess what he did? He gave the teddy bear back to his grandmother. It wasn't that he didn't want the teddy bear anymore. Instead, he said was giving the bear back so someone else can have a miracle. Love always hopes.

I have just about come to the end of my little talk with all of you. I don't have anything else in my container, although I hope you now have plenty of ideas of how we can all find ways to share love with others, including leaving today with a teddy bear. But I do want to show you one other symbol of love. The symbol of love is what I have been using to hold all these gifts of love. I have been taking all of these gifts of love out of what is itself a most precious and beautiful gift of love. I have been taking all of these gifts of love out of a manger. Many years ago, God put his own Son into a manger like this. There has never been a more important or a greater gift of love ever given. God put his gift of love into the manger because God wants every one of us, and every one of his children all over the world, to know just how much God loves each one of us. God put his son Jesus into the manger.

Even though I have given you many ideas for how you can share love with others, I don't want to miss the chance to remind you that there is nothing more important than for you to accept this gift, the gift of Jesus, the gift that was placed in a manger, and allow God to fill your heart with his lasting and eternal love. "For God so loved the world that

he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life.” Bless you dear friends. May every heart be filled with the love of God, and may we share that precious gift of love with others. Amen.