

Faith Expressed in Love

Good morning. It's been about 25 years since I last came to OIC. For 2 or 3 years, my young family attended here back in the early 90s. This is where we first met my good friends Don Khadur and Dave Taylor and others who have remained life-long friends. This is where I met OIC founding pastor Jack Marshall and DMI founder Neville Muir, people who have had a profound and lasting impact on my life and that of my family. It's a privilege and a pleasure to be back here. Thank you for the invitation to come and speak.

I'd like to begin this morning by declaring the wonderful truth that God loves and speaks to every one of His children. Not in a metaphorical or vague way, but in a powerful, dynamic and intimate way. He speaks to us primarily and most clearly through the Bible. He also speaks to us through His creation, through the promptings and the personal illuminations of the Holy Spirit, through dreams on occasion, and through the words of fellow believers. This morning I would like to share with you, as a worker now for DMI, a brief testimony of how God has spoken to me, first through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, then expand on this in the wonderful words of Scripture.

About 2 years ago, I was shaving one morning and God spoke to me. (I don't know why but I hear from God more when I'm shaving than at probably any other time. It's right after my quiet time so maybe that has something to do with it.) I heard the Lord say inaudibly but very clearly, "You should work for DMI". (Deaf Ministries International.) It was completely out of the blue, and was like a light going off. I was very excited about this word but I was also apprehensive. What was I supposed to do with it? Was I to call up Neville (the Head of DMI) and say, "Hey, guess what God told me?!" What if God didn't tell him that?!

I approached Alayne Madore, the head of DMI Japan and she encouraged me to contact Neville directly and share with him what was going on in my heart. I prepared and sent to Neville a 'vision statement' of sorts in line with what I felt God was putting on my heart with regards to DMI (which was pretty audacious now when I look back on it, but that was the prompting in my heart).

Let me read to you verbatim Neville's reply: "I am so excited I can hardly breathe! So much of what you have mentioned is just what we have been needing and have discussed in our office meetings over the past weeks. ...Your ideas and proposals are so encouraging to us, I can hardly believe this is happening." So that was good confirmation!

Long story short, in July last year when Neville's health was failing, I was asked to take on the role of Australian Coordinator. And a couple of weeks ago I was asked to take on the role of International Coordinator. While I'm very encouraged by this, I take zero credit for it. This is the fruit of God's will and his zeal. In DMI, we face many challenges everyday from our workers and students in the fields, but regardless of hardships, it is a pure joy to be serving where God has called a person to serve.

Sadly, Neville died last November after a long illness, but before he passed away, I had the privilege of travelling with him to

(Pictures) churches and schools across Asia. I don't travel well. I don't like sleeping on dirt floors, I don't like living without running water and I don't like most food.

Despite these major inconveniences, I loved it. I loved meeting the kids and the staff and the pastors and their congregations, many of whom I interviewed for the blog I write, or simply for the delight in getting to know them better.

I want to share with you just one of the many extraordinary people I met.

This is Khan Lun. She is Burmese and attends our school for the Deaf in Myanmar. She was 13 years old when I met her but she was studying in grade 1. This is because she lived so far from the school that for 12 years she never knew there was a school for the Deaf. So for the first twelve years of her life, she lived in a silent, lonely, frustrating world without any education, and without any purpose or hope for her life. And she told me, she hated being Deaf. But since coming to the school, Khan Lun has learned how to sign, she is excelling in her studies, she has made friends, she has found community, and she has found faith in Christ - a faith that is real and transformative. And now, she told me, she loves being Deaf. I didn't believe her, of course, when she told me that so I put it quite frankly to her: 'You mean to tell me, that if there was a some miracle cure or healing for Deafness, you wouldn't want it?' She said no! No way! And she explained why. She said that if she became hearing, then she would have to leave this school and church, and this community means everything to her. That's when I realised a fundamental truth:

Khan Lun's need for love far exceeds her need to hear.

This love that Khan Lun has experienced is a big deal. Christian love is the greatest and most powerful virtue. It's central to the two greatest commandments in the Bible –

to love God and to love our neighbours. In his first letter to the Corinthians, in the middle of teaching about the body of Christ, spiritual gifts and the power of God, Paul suddenly breaks off to talk about something far more important. He says,

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. "

Deep down, people's craving for love far exceeds their craving for supernatural gifting or ability. On the contrary, these incredibly precious gifts and manifestations and deeds of the Spirit are meaningless without love. Note that Paul doesn't say that if we live our lives powerfully and with great sacrifice but without love then our works are slightly diminished, or less effective or somehow compromised. He doesn't speak in such half measures. He says that what we gain "is nothing" and even what we are "is nothing" if we don't act in love.

This is sobering and worthy of extra reflection. Paul speaks in lofty terms here. He talks about exercising the supernatural gifts and moving mountains by faith and about giving every possession we have to the poor. But the principle Paul is teaching here applies to the small things in everyday life, too. Let me paraphrase it this way:

"If I serve up the most delicious and healthy meal to my family but do it begrudgingly and without love, then it counts for nothing. If I spend every evening helping my kids with their homework and getting them ready for bed but do it with annoyance and without love, I will be nothing to my kids. If I work hard everyday to provide for my family so they can live well or to be charitable with my earnings but I carry a spirit of reluctance or even bitterness toward my work and/or my family or friends, I gain nothing."

Christian love is powerful. It can't be faked but it can be misunderstood. For something so fundamental to life and powerful as love, it's extraordinary how misunderstood it can be. That's why in this 1 Corinthians 13 passage, Paul tells us 7 things that love is and 7 things that love isn't.

Love is: patient, kind, protecting, trusting, hoping, persevering and rejoicing in truth

Love is not: envious, boastful, dishonouring, self-seeking, easily angered, unforgiving, or proud.

How could we confuse these? Without too much difficulty actually! We can justify envy by putting it under the banner of godly desire. We can foster self-centredness and pride under the banners of self-care and self-love. We can boast and be proud under the banner of a healthy self-confidence. We can even dishonour

others, withhold forgiveness and exercise anger under the banners of tough love, discipline and righteous anger.

But Christian love is none of those things. It is patient, kind, protecting, trusting, hoping, persevering and rejoicing in truth. Each of these qualities is worth a sermon but let me touch on just the first one here today. Patience. (Forbearance) Love is patient. I've chosen to focus on this because of COVID. I think it's really tested everyone's patience. We're tired of COVID. We're tired of the restrictions it has brought and the disruptions its brought to our lives. It's mucked up our plans - often plans that we consider to be godly. It has separated families and in some cases destroyed families.

Be patient. Don't tire of loving each other. Especially here in the body of Christ, don't allow distance or other restrictions to diminish your affections for one another. Persevere with the Zoom meetings, the prayers over the phone, the email correspondence. Don't give up meeting together, in whatever form it might take. Keep caring for one another, no matter how you need to do that. Through patience, let this be a time when love shines strongest not despite the bothers of COVID but because of the bothers of COVID. Love is patient.

Paul concludes this chapter by saying that

"now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love". Some people think that this is because faith and hope are temporal (they are only for this life) and love is eternal. But that's not the reason that Paul declares loves superiority here.

Love is the greatest because faith and hope can only work by love, and only show themselves by love. Without love, the other two are nothing. (Paul has just explained that.)

James talks about this in his letter in the Bible. He says if you see a brother in need (of love) but don't help them, your faith is dead. If you share with others your hope in the resurrection but you don't care for them, your hope is as good as dead. Love is the proof of your faith and your hope. James says, "a person is considered righteous by what they do [by their acts of love] and not by faith alone" (James 2:24) This is not a contradiction of Paul's teaching on salvation by grace, it explains it.

"As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead." (James 2:26)

This brings us back to the work of DMI. If we only preached the gospel but did nothing to help, our preaching and our faith is useless. "Dead." On the other hand, if we only bring humanitarian aid, that's a kindness but life is more than food and clothes. What people need more than anything else is to know Christ. To give people physical bread but deny them the Bread of life is a horrendous oversight.

Paul sums up this pairing of faith and love very simply. In Galatians 5:6 he says,

"The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love." And this pairing of faith with love is essential because, as we've seen, faith without love is dead, and love without faith can just become a niceness competition.

When Jesus spoke about love, He tied it in to faith in God. When Jesus spoke about forgiveness, he tied in to our relationship with God. Whenever Jesus talked about peace, it was always connected to God and His own identity as the Son of God.

Christian love cannot be separated from faith in God. It isn't token morality. Christian love - the love of Christ in us - is life-changing because it deeply affects the body and the soul. Through great sacrifice, it brings great change to people's lives.

This life-affecting kind of love for others doesn't come naturally. It is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. And when it grows rich and strong in our lives, it is powerful. And so Paul says,

'the only thing that counts is the fostering of faith under an outpouring of love'.

DMI does this and it does it well. We have founded 180 churches for the Deaf around the developing world to foster faith, and we have founded or partner in dozens of schools and training programs and employment projects to show a practical love. These typically work together in one community. We do all of this because we are committed to expressing our faith in love. And it's changing the world for many people.

Can I encourage you today to

consider afresh, prayerfully, how you can grow and express your faith in love? You might feel led to do that with us at DMI. You might feel led to do that by bringing a fresh impetus to a mission you are already serving in. You might feel led to do this through a completely new field of outreach. Be led by the Spirit in this.

Whatever you do, don't nod your head and say 'good point' and then leave without responding. Please prayerfully consider how you can renew your expression of faith in Christ through love because that's the only thing that counts.

Pray.