



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - June 18, 2017 Sermon

The Transitive Property of Love Part II: Lasting Connections

1 Corinthians 12 and 13 (selected verses)

Our Scripture lesson today connects two chapters from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, two chapters that, while they may be familiar to us, we usually don't connect, although I think Paul meant them to be connected. The first chapter, Chapter 12, speaks of the church as the body of Christ, and of our all being members of that body. Like the parts of our physical bodies, we all have different functions but all the functions alike matter. We usually read this chapter when we're talking about our various jobs, our vocations, often, but not always, in the church.

The second chapter, chapter 13, talks about love. We usually read it at weddings. But it's important to remember that the love Paul speaks of here is not exclusively romantic love. The Greek word is "agape," and in the old King James translation it was translated "charity." But back then, "charity" didn't mean just giving to non-profit organizations as it does today. It had a much wider meaning: it meant God's original, ultimate, eternal love—a love from which all love—romantic love, friendship-love, family-love, all love, really—flowed.

The connection Paul wants to make is that this agape-charity love is what connects us as members of the body of Christ.

Still there's a puzzle in chapter 13. Paul says famously that faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love. But why is love the greatest? After all, faith and hope are good things, too. The answer is right in the chapter: love never ends. When God completes all things, when the kingdom of God comes, faith and hope will no longer be needed: we will know what we once only believed in; we will have what we once only hoped for. Love, however will continue; the love that connects us now, will then be perfected: it will connect us forever. Listen now for God's Word:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Love never ends. When the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

It's wonderful to have the Knox Choir back: and Cristhian and Alex, wonderful to have you visiting us from our sister church, Primera Iglesia in Barranquilla, Colombia, and great that you could go with the choir on the tour. On their tour this past week, the choir performed at four different churches—and led worship in still another—in New York, Maine, and Pennsylvania.

And believe me, at every church, there were connections; boy, oh boy, were there connections.

So when the tour got to First Presbyterian Church in Albany, for instance, well, you know that's where Glenn and Miriam Leupold are co-pastors (they used to be co-associate pastors here, you know). Anyway Glenn was part of group that founded our partnership with Colombia way back twenty years ago; as

a matter of fact, he was the first person from Westminster to go to Colombia. . . And did you know that Shannan Vance-Ocampo goes to their church? The Leupold's, I mean. But back when she was at Wat-chung Avenue Presbyterian Church in NJ, she supervised Kori Phillips (you know Kori's now at Bradley Hills Church in Maryland with David Gray (you know David's the son of Ed and Virginia Gray who go here), anyway because of Kori, Sally Dyer got to know Shannan, when she was in NJ doing Hurricane Sandy relief work, and because of Sally, Cameron Stevens (you know she's the daughter Dick and Marsh Stevens, who go here) went to NJ too to do Sandy relief work but now she's in Louisville working for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance . . . So anyway, Shannan, not Cameron, knows Alex's parents in Colombia although Cameron may know them too since she knows Mario who's now at Skaneateles NY, where the choir also sang. . .

Is all this clear? If not, just think of Groundhog Day, I mean the movie, not the day itself, although the movie is about the day itself, specifically, Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, a small town just outside of Pittsburgh where (and this is true in real life not just the movie) the locals all gather every year on February 2nd—it's a day-long, whole-town festival—to see whether Punxsutawney Phil (that's the groundhog's name) sees his shadow or not, thus foretelling whether there will be six more weeks of winter or an early spring.

I know, I know, here we are, just having gotten through the first real heat wave of summer, and I'm talking about Groundhog Day. But believe me, if you want to appreciate that string of connections I just laid out, if you want to know what it's like to be connected to Westminster for 20, 25, 50, 65+ years (as the members we are honoring today have been) or even just 20 minutes, if you want to understand the "connectionalism" of the Presbyterian church, or how love connects the whole Body of Christ, if you want to see the Kingdom of God at hand, glimpse heaven here on earth—think of Groundhog Day, I mean the movie, not the day itself, although the movie is about the day itself, specifically, Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, a small town just outside of Pittsburgh where (and this is true in real life not just the movie) the locals all gather every year on February 2nd—it's a day-long, whole-town festival—to see whether Punxsutawney Phil (that's the groundhog's name) . . .

Is this all clear? If not, just think of Groundhog Day, I mean the movie not the day itself, although the movie is about the day itself . . .

I better stop. But in the movie, it doesn't stop: it's the same thing over and over and over and over and over and over again, the same *day* over and over and over and over and over and over again. At least it is for Bill Murray, er, I mean for Phil Connors, who is perfectly played by Bill Murray.

Bill Murray, er, Phil Connors—cynical, wisecracking, charming in his way, at least a first, but in a 110% self-absorbed, jerky sort of way, so that there's a meanness underneath that's really not charming at all: "people are morons," he says looking around Punxsutawney—anyway, Phil Connors is the weatherman for one of the local TV stations in Pittsburgh. He's been sent out to Punxsutawney, along with producer Rita (innocently played by Andi MacDowell) and cameramen Larry (awkwardly played by Chris Elliott) to do the weather live from the Groundhog Day festival. And of course, for Phil, this is hell (I mean being with these people, in this town): he can't get out of there fast enough. Only he can't get out of there at all: they get snowed in by a blizzard Phil failed to predict ("I make the weather" he shouts, the very picture of frustrated human hubris). And then when he wakes up the next morning . . . well, it's not the next morning, it's the *same* morning, it's Groundhog Day all over again and again, and again. He can't get out of there at all—forever.

And here's the thing: Phil is the only one aware of this time warp, this time loop, this endless repetition, this eternal recurrence of the same day over and over and over again. No one else seems aware of it at all. All of them seem to be nothing more than backdrops, extras, extensions of his consciousness, there only to respond in various ways to whatever Phil does, but unaware that it's the same day repeating itself ad infinitum. It's as if he's the only one with memory, and everyone else is on a 24-hour amnesia cycle.

After the initial shock, disbelief, and rage, Phil goes through all the stages you might expect:

First, there's license: I can do anything I want, no consequences!—whoopeee! He stuffs himself with [fast] donuts and cake and pancakes and syrups and sweets and ice creams galore for breakfast no less, robs an armored truck, buys himself a Mercedes, gets whatever he wants however he wants it—and yet it all turns to ashes in his mouth. He wakes up every morning alone again, and it's still Groundhog Day—again. No happiness here.

Next, it's despair: nothing ever changes, nothing I do matters, it's pointless. So he tries to kill himself any number of times in any number of ways, some of them quite inventive—the funniest is when Phil the weatherman kidnaps Phil the groundhog, steals a pickup truck, and drives off a cliff with him—the picture of Bill Murray holding the groundhog up so he (the groundhog) can steer the steering wheel off the cliff is worth the price of Netflix rental—it ends in a fiery crash in the canyon below. But to no avail, the “next” morning . . . well, it's still the *same* morning. And it's still the same Phil: he wakes up alone . . . again . . . on Groundhog Day.

So next he tries self-improvement. He wants to win Rita, and therefore he wants to be the kind of man she wants. So he learns everything about her, and tries to make himself into that kind of man. When he learns that she majored in 19th-century French poetry, he learns French and memorizes Baudelaire. When he learns that she loves music, he becomes a virtuoso on the piano—remember he has infinite time! She loves art? He becomes a master ice-sculptor (hey, it's Punxsutawney—what else are you going to do?). Imagine you've got umpteen million tries to get the same first date right—that's Phil's advantage and his scheme. And yet scheme as he might, it's all to no avail; he doesn't win her; he doesn't win her because he's still scheming to get what *he* wants. He doesn't win her, because in the end, however much he improves himself, he's still all about Phil, and Phil getting what he wants. Phil, charming in his way, at least a first, but in a 110% self-absorbed, jerky sort of way, so that there's a meanness underneath that's really not charming at all.

But in the midst of this, something happens, *something* changes—and that something is Phil. He *does* improve himself. With each new Groundhog day, he is not starting over again from scratch—he is not just learning the notes on the piano for the first time again and again, or how to say “Bonjour” again, or how to take the chainsaw to the ice-block for the first time. No, everything he learns—that is, everything good and true and real thing he learns—carries over to the next Groundhog Day and to the next and to the next, etc. So he becomes an accomplished French speaker, piano player, ice sculptor, etc. His develops his talents and those developed talents continue to develop. They last.

And something else changes too: Phil begins to see, really see, the people of Punxsutawney—they're not just backdrops, extras, extensions of his consciousness, there only to respond in various ways to whatever Phil does. They're not morons. They're human beings with their own lives, their own stories, their own struggles, their own joys and heartbreaks, they're human beings like . . . well, like Phil. There's a young boy who falls out of a tree on that February 2nd—until Phil is there to catch him. Three older woman, driving into town for Groundhog Day, get stuck with a flat tire—until Phil is there to fix it. A man eating in a restaurant chokes to death on a piece of meat—until Phil is there with the Heimlich maneuver. There's a young couple struggling with their relationship—until Phil is there to counsel them. An old homeless man dies alone on that February 2nd—until Phil is there to try to save him, and to weep over his lifeless body in a cold, dark alley, with the snow swirling in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania.

These connections that Phil makes with other human beings last—these people live, and live better lives, because of him. Every good and true and real thing that he does—every act of compassion and human kindness—every human connection he makes—lasts. Their effects carry over to the “next” Groundhog Day, and the next and the next and the next. Punxsutawney becomes a better place, a more human place, because of Phil Connors. He develops connections with these people and these connections continue to develop. They last. He's writing his good deeds in the pages of eternity:

here's another, different way to think of the same thing happening over and over again: love never ends.

It's a parable. The movie, I mean. I know I know, in cinematic-genre terms, it's a romantic comedy. But really, it's a parable: a simple fairy-tale-like story meant to illustrate a simple, profound truth about the universe—a truth that God has written into the very fabric, the very heart, of the universe. Not that God has hidden this truth, mind you, it's right there in front of our eyes for all to see. It's hidden in plain view, as the Bible puts it—hidden only because, like Phil, we usually go about too blinded by our own self-absorption to see it. And because this truth is written into the very heart of the universe, it finds expressions in all the great moral, spiritual, religious, and philosophical traditions.

Just so you don't think I'm crazy here: Some years back, the Museum of Modern Art in New York wanted to put on a film series: *The Hidden God: Film and Faith*. They canvassed leaders of all the major religious denominations, all the spirituality groups, in the city. "What film best expresses the truths of your faith/spiritual world-view?" Remember—this is New York (lots of sophistication and diversity) and this is the Museum of Modern Art, (we're talking avant-garde here)—so you're expecting—what?—lots of dark, obscure, art-house "films" with subtitles? Do I have to tell you which "film" was named the most? By a lot. That's right . . . *Groundhog Day*.

"In order to find your life, your very self, you first must lose it. But whoever tries to hold on to his life, his very self, that one will lose it." That's one way that this simple profound truth finds expression in our tradition. Here's another: "Give, and it will be given to you—a beautiful and bountiful measure, pressed down, shaken together, overflowing into your lap." Phil Connors receives a beautiful and bountiful measure overflowing into his lap—a measure of well-being, happiness, and joy far greater than anything he could have possibly imagined just from contributing to the happiness and well-being of others. He finds his life—and his very self. That's grace.

But in the end, as you may remember, Phil doesn't win Rita. Rita wins Phil. On the evening of Groundhog Day, at the big town dance, there's a "bachelor auction where the ladies bid on all the eligible bachelors—and remember it's all for charity." So says the emcee. So Rita outbids all the others, gives everything she has—\$339.88—to buy Phil; so now she "owns him," and believe me, Phil couldn't be happier. And if that isn't a metaphor for Christ's redeeming us, for Jesus' giving everything he has to buy us out of our slavery to sin and death, then I don't what is. And remember it's all for "charity" (in the old King James sense of the word). And so they live happily ever after—in Punxsutawney, no less: the place that seemed like hell is now revealed to be, in the last iconic, idyllic, snow-covered shot, the Kingdom of God at hand, a glimpse of heaven here on earth . . .

I tell you, in the economy of God, the real economy, the one that is at work here on earth, nothing good is ever lost. I know, at times, it seems otherwise—to me, too. At times, it seems that the meanness and the hatred win. At times, it seems pointless: that all our best efforts, all our lives, are written in water. But that's not true. The connections we make with other human beings last. Just look at all the connections we are celebrating here today, and how they've lasted. Every good and true and real thing that we do—every act of compassion and human kindness—every human connection we make—lasts. Forever. Love never ends.

Do not be deceived, my friends. Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Love never ends. And if it seems otherwise in our world today, well, all the more reason for us to continue to connect, to love the world and God, and God in the world, as a witness to God's love for the world in Jesus Christ.

God's love for the world in Jesus Christ—it flows through us, brings us into communion with God and with one another, and lasts—lasts forever. Love never ends.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.