

Text: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Introduction –

Who doesn't appreciate a good love story, especially around Valentine's Day? I was reading a news article, this week, about a young couple who were drawn together in the most unlikely circumstances.

A twenty-seven year old woman, named Heather, had just received the worst possible news from her doctor. Out of the blue, she was diagnosed with stage 4 liver disease. Unless she received an immediate transplant, she would only have a few months to live. Finding a donor, in such a short span of time, would take nothing short of a miracle. Heather could feel her body shutting down, and was beginning to lose hope.

Meanwhile, in an office building across town, a man named Chris happened to overhear coworkers talking about a woman who desperately needed a liver transplant. He had never met the woman. They were complete strangers. But Chris felt compelled to do something. He had served in the Marine Corps, where he learned never to run away from anything. So he went to the hospital to find out if his liver was compatible. As fate would have it, he turned out to be a perfect match.

Before the transplant was scheduled, Chris and Heather met for the first time. They got together for lunch, so she could meet the person who was donating half of his liver to save her life. He told her, "you owe me absolutely nothing, I just want to help." The idea of a total stranger doing all of this for her was overwhelming.

Soon after that meeting, Chris and Heather both checked into the University of Illinois hospital where the transplant was performed. Surgeons removed half of his healthy liver and used it to repair her damaged liver. The procedure was a success. She made a full recovery. When they left the hospital, Chris and Heather could have gone their separate ways, but decided to stay in touch. They had developed a friendship, and over time they became more than friends. A year later the two were married. It is pretty incredible that when Chris first decided to donate part of his liver to a total stranger, he had no idea he would be helping to save the life of his future wife. (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/woman-finds-perfect-stranger-to-donate-liver-which-ended-up-a-match-made-in-heaven/>)

I think that has to be one of the best real life love stories I've ever heard. It's better than anything you will watch on the Hallmark Channel this week. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if someone makes this into a movie one day. But as amazing as their story is, I am still convinced that the greatest love story of all time is found in the Bible. It is about a God who loved us so much He went to unbelievable lengths to make us His own. He did more than donate an organ; He gave His life for us.

The Bible calls this love story the gospel, which simply means "the good news." And it is the greatest news that a person could ever hear. In a world where people are searching desperately

for love, wondering if there is anyone out there who really cares, God wants us to know that He loves you more than you could ever imagine. His love is deeper than oceans, and reaches higher than the sky. God wants us to receive His love so that we might enter a relationship with Him.

This is one of the reasons our church exists. As those who have come to experience the love of Jesus Christ, we want to tell the whole world what the Lord has done for us. We cannot keep it to ourselves.

If the gospel is the greatest love story of all time, we must share it with others.

Our commitment to the gospel is among the core values for Grace Gospel Church. We believe that Jesus Christ is God's Son, born of a virgin, who lived a perfect life, and who offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins, and He rose from the dead on the third day. It is our desire that the gospel to be at the center of all that we do.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul reminds us of the importance of the gospel. He tells us in verse 3 that this is of "first importance." There is no doctrine more basic to the Christian faith than the person and work of Jesus Christ. While there are many good and worthwhile things that churches should be doing, above all else we are called to proclaim the good news of Christ's love.

Just how great is the love of Jesus Christ? We find the answer in these verses...

Christ's love is so great, He was willing to die for us.

In verse 3 the apostle tells us, "*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...*"

In order to fully appreciate the significance of that statement we have to take a step back and recognize who Jesus Christ truly is. He is the Son of God, immortal, all-powerful, everlasting, holy, pure, majestic, glorious...

He had no obligation, whatsoever, to do anything for us. He could have looked down from heaven, at the awful condition of the human race and said, "You got yourself into this mess; let's see if you can get yourself out of it." But He refused to that. Even though it wasn't really His problem, He chose to make it His problem. He cared about us so much that He was willing to step down from the glory of heaven to enter our world. Clothing Himself in humanity, Christ took on flesh and blood to become mortal man. He entered the world as a baby, and walked this earth for thirty years, experiencing life as one of us. He shared in our joys and our sorrows. He knew the blessing of friendship, as well as the heartache of loss. He felt compassion for every person He met along the way. After living a perfect life, Jesus gave Himself into the hands of evil men, and suffered a criminal's death on the cross. Why? ...to save us. The death of Jesus was not an accident. He wasn't simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. No! Christ accomplished exactly what He had set out to do. He paid the penalty for our sin.

“Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures.” The apostle reminds us that the gospel is consistent with the message of Old Testament. All throughout history, God had promised to send a Savior. Christ is the fulfillment of that promise. The prophet Isaiah looked ahead to the future and described the ministry of Jesus saying,

“He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him.” (Isaiah 53:5-6)

The suffering Jesus endured was not on account of anything He had done. It wasn't deserved. No one has ever lived a better life than Him. He perfectly embodied God's love in way that no one else could ever do. And yet He was condemned. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. How awful that must have been for the pure and spotless Lamb of God to feel the tremendous weight of our sin. All of the world's hatred, pride, bitterness, greed, lust, and deceit... every wicked act ever committed on this earth was heaped upon His shoulders and Jesus carried it to the cross.

Sometimes we focus so much on the physical ordeal that Jesus went through that we forget this was only one aspect of the agony He endured to save us. There was also the emotional suffering of being rejected by the people He loved, and abandoned by his closest friends. Worst of all was the spiritual torment of bearing God's wrath for the sins of the world. The innocent was condemned so that the guilty could be set free.

It must be incredible love, if He was willing to go through all of this for us. No one had to persuade Him to do this. No one needed to twist His arm. He did so willingly, and voluntarily. Think about some of the crazy things that people have done for love... A young man saves every spare penny, for months, so that he will finally be able to afford an engagement ring for the woman he loves. A woman stays up for twenty four hours, without sleep, in order to take care of her sick children, and sick husband. A man drives home from a business trip, passing through several states without stopping to take a break, because he missing his wife and family. There was a song they used to play on the radio, years ago that went: “And I would walk 500 miles, And I would walk 500 more, Just to be the man who walk a thousand miles to fall down at your door.” That would be a tremendous demonstration of love, but it still doesn't compare with what Christ endured for us.

1 John 4:10 says: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” It was love that compelled Christ to become our Savior. If he was willing to do all of this for us, there is no reason to think he will abandon us now.

Christ was willing to lay down His life for us, but there is more to the gospel than this.

Christ's love is so great, He wouldn't let death come between us.

Look at verses 3-4. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 tells us that, “... *that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...*”

For most people, it must have seemed as if Christ’s death was a tragic end to a life of love. That’s how the disciples felt, after they watched the soldiers lead Jesus away and nail His hands and feet to the cross. -- It was over. Humanity was doomed. Whatever hope they might have had before was obliterated. They spent the next couple of days in hiding, fearing that all was lost, but they were wrong. On the third day came the joyful news: “**He is risen!**” The disciples could hardly believe it. Peter ran to the tomb as quickly as he could, and when He got there he saw that the stone had been rolled away and the body of Jesus was nowhere to be found. Jesus appeared to His disciples multiple times over the next forty days. At first, they were so startled they thought they were seeing a ghost, but He told them, “*Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.*” (Luke 24:38-39)

There is no force in the universe powerful enough to contain Him. Not even death could extinguish His love. He conquered the grave, and won the victory. It wouldn’t be good news if the gospel had ended at the cross. How would we know that our sins are forgiven? How could we be sure that the sacrifice He gave is enough? How would we be certain that there is hope for the future? The resurrection answers those questions, pointing to risen Savior whose love for us will never end.

I’ve never been a big fan of tragedies. I prefer happy endings. I remember reading Romeo and Juliet for the first time in my high school literature class. Of course, it is considered a classic, one of the greatest love stories ever written. At the beginning of the play a young man and woman fall in love despite impossible odds. They are supposed to be mortal enemies. Their families have been at war for generations. But for some reason they are drawn to each other. The couple tries to bring peace in their families, but it’s no use. They realize there is no way they could ever be married if they remain, and so they plan to run away together. But things do not work out the way they are supposed to, and in a complicated series of events they both end up dead. When I finished reading the story I couldn’t help but think: “That’s it? Come on Shakespeare, can’t you do better than that? What kind of love story ends with the death of the main characters?” Maybe that’s why I never became a literature major in college... Thankfully the gospel is not a tragedy. It tells us of a love that will never end.

Because He lives, **we can enjoy a personal relationship with Jesus Christ**, growing closer in our walk with Him each day. Christians don’t worship a dead Messiah, we follow the living Savior.

And because Christ lives, **we can have hope for eternity**. One day, these earthly bodies of ours will fail, but death will not be the end of our existence. We will share in His resurrection. The Lord has conquered the grave, and His people will live forever in His presence.

If Christ didn’t rise from the dead there is no point to our lives on this earth. This is all there is. We might as well eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Praise be to God that Christ

is risen, and that gives us a whole new perspective. It is why we spend our lives serving God, because we know that our labor is not in vain.

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:53–57)

Paul spends the rest of the chapter, in 1 Corinthians 15, defending the resurrection. He says, “don’t take my word for it. There were many reliable eyewitnesses who were there and seen these things with their own eyes. Paul lists some of them: Peter, and the rest of the apostles, James the brother of Jesus, and more than 500 disciples. Almost 25 years had gone by, since that glorious day, but most of these witnesses were still alive when Paul wrote these words. They devoted their lives to telling others what they had seen, sharing the good news.

Christ’s love is so great, once you meet Him you’ll never be the same.

We see that in the lives of the people who are listed here in our passage. Jesus appeared to each of these individuals, after the resurrection, and every one of them went away a different person than they were before.

Take **Peter**, for instance. Peter was the disciple who had been so sure of himself, he thought he was ready to die with Jesus, but when the moment came he melted in fear and denied knowing Jesus three times. He was so ashamed of himself, he ran from the place weeping. I’m sure he felt unworthy, and wondered if the Lord could ever forgive him. And yet, Peter was one of the first people to see the risen Christ. The Lord appeared to him, and reassured the disciple of His love. Peter had been a fisherman from Galilee, but he became a fisher of men and spent the rest of his life fearlessly serving Christ.

Or consider **James**, the brother of Jesus. The gospels tell us that for most of the Lord’s earthly ministry, his brothers didn’t believe him (John 7:5). But something happened along the way to change their mind. Jesus appeared to James, and we read about him in the book of Acts as one of the key leaders in the Jerusalem church.

But perhaps the most striking change is seen in the apostle **Paul**. In verses 8-10 he writes,

“Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”

Paul humbly looks back at what his life had been like before he met the Lord. He had been so sure of himself, and self-righteous, that that he had no idea he was headed the wrong way. Hatred and violence filled his heart, as he sought to destroy those who called on the name of the

Lord. But the turning point in his life was when Christ appeared to Him, on the road to Damascus. From that moment on, he became a completely different person. The Lord melted his heart of stone, and filled him with love. Only a miracle of God could change someone's life so dramatically. The one who had been a persecutor of the faith became a champion of the gospel.

No matter how broken or messed up a person's life might be, Christ still loves you. He is reaching out to you. He wants you to know the depths of forgiveness and grace. He doesn't wait for you to change, or get your act together, before welcoming you into His arms. He wants to enter your life, right now, wherever you are. And when we receive him into our life and glorious transformation begins.

Every person who meets the Lord goes away a changed person. How has the love of Christ changed your life?

We got a pretty good snow this week. I don't know how many inches it turned out to be, but I was surprised at how quickly it came. When I picked up Aireanah from school Wednesday was complaining about how messy the roads had become, and I said "This is terrible!" But she was happy to see the snow, and said "No daddy, it's terrible good." That snow covered the ground, and covered the roads, but its amazing the difference a few degrees can make, and when it warmed up the other day it all melted away as quickly as it had come. Christ's love can melt the coldest heart, and when it finally breaks through it will change your life.

Conclusion –

Why is the gospel a core value of our church? Because there is a world that is perishing all around us, that desperately needs to hear the good news of Christ's love. Every individual is responsible for how they will respond to this message, but we are responsible to take it to them and given them an opportunity to believe. And because there is no other Savior. This is the good news. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. There is no other. Because Christ's love not only saves us, but gives us the strength to live for Him every day.