

Sermon on 1. Corinthians 14, 1-5 + 20-26, 25.06.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Dear Congregation,

She clears out the last moving crates and suddenly holds the wedding Bible in her hand. It is already ten years since they were married. A book mark is in the exact place where their wedding verse is written: 'So faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.' At the time, ten years ago, there was no question: Without doubt, there was much love, more than anything else. In the meantime, however, hope has gained a great deal of importance, she thinks. No longer is everything love, but has become a matter of habit. How will we go on, she thinks. And then she simply continues to read:

1)Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. 2)For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. 3)On the other hand, he who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. 4)He who speaks in tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 5)Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless some one interprets, so that the church may be edified.

She skips a few verses.

20)Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking mature. 21)In the law it is written (Isaiah 28,11-12): "By men of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord." 22)Thus, tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers. 23)If, therefore, the whole church assembles and all speak in tongues and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? 24)But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, 25)the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling to his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. 26)What then, brethren? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

"Let all things be done for edification", she repeats quietly to herself. But she shakes her head. What it said about love in chapter thirteen was acceptable, that was still easy to understand. Furthermore, she had heard it at every church wedding. Well, she had chosen it for herself. It is really a nice text saying that nothing is worth anything or nothing means as much as love.

But now, this speaking in tongues, prophesying. If they prophesied it would become apparent what is hidden in their heart. That would indeed be ideal, if we could actually disclose what is secretly concealed in our hearts. To speak to each other openly and honestly. I do not truly know any more what he thinks and feels. What thoughts he has, how he views our relationship. Which has really changed since we have children. Whoever speaks in tongues speaks of mysteries and says things which do not benefit others but only himself. Right, it is really not good to keep everything to oneself. It does not make things better. And it remains obscure if our answer to the question, what do you think, is just "Nothing" or "It's okay". It does not become apparent what I truly think, perhaps we should... - "Well, are all crates unpacked?" He stands at the door and smiles at her. "What have you got there?" he asks. "Do you still remember? Look. - Our wedding Bible. Do you still know our wedding verse?" - Test question. "Hmm, faith, love, hope, and somehow love is very important. She smiles. "Something like that", she says. "We have to go there again", she says. "Where?" he asks, "to church?" - "No" she says, "that love is the most important thing between us" - "How

do you mean?” – “Well, she says, we tend to live our own lives. You in your job, I mostly with the children. I don’t really know what you think and foremost, what you feel...” – Now it is in the open” she thinks. He is quiet for a moment, looks at the Bible, and looks at her. “Let’s sit down” he says, and they begin to talk, quite frankly, without leading each other on. They talk about their expectations and hopes. They discover common things and laugh, because in many respects their thoughts were alike. They discovered in this conversation that much of what had bound them together in the beginning was still there. Love is still there, but it is different.

Dear Congregation,

Perhaps somehow we all wish to have such conversations, when we talk openly with each other but still have the feeling that the conversation is founded in love. And this is what Paul calls “to prophesy”. To prophesy is a conversation among Christians, a conversation in which this difficult balance is maintained between truth and understanding each other.

Therefore, it is not only about telling a person what burdens our heart, but about being willing to listen what he thinks, how he interprets what we say. Prophesying must not necessarily be a conversation about faith, but it is certainly a conversation in faith, where we can truly see a brother or sister in the other person.

And if we look again at the beginning of this imaginary story of the couple, then we notice that there is an actual connection between love in chapters 13 and 14 of the First Letter to the Corinthians.

“So faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” And the next verse, the first verse of our sermon text, reads:

1) Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.

Perhaps sometimes we think that love within the congregation is only active love, deaconship or love for one’s neighbour. But here, love becomes a sign of how we talk to each other.

We all know that we often speak like those in the Corinthian congregation who speak in tongues. Whatever the content may be, and, incidentally, this is nothing that is discussed at great length in the Bible. Speaking in tongues is found in the Old Testament only as a statement, namely in the text that is quoted here from Isaiah 28; and in the New Testament; Paul refers to the events in Corinth, where people speak in tongues, their speech is unintelligible, no one understands it, therefore, what they say has to be translated.

We, too, often lack clarity, speak indistinctly, mince our words. It is not always easy to say clearly what we think, and most of all, it is difficult to communicate to others what we feel. One is already at someone’s mercy, when one lets the heart speak.

Others, again, are too straight forward and don’t shy away from telling someone what they think. This often works even without words.

I want to mention an example here, which, unfortunately, concerns also us as a congregation. Perhaps you have also noticed already that we now and then gather younger families here, who have, of course, small children. Recently I have heard why some of these families have not returned. It has to do with the fact that their children are too small to attend Sunday School, and sometimes they make noises during the service while they sit with their parents.

I cannot remember that this was particularly disruptive during the past few months. I was under the impression that parents, when it was too much, left the service and solved the problem in a responsible way. In spite of this, without my knowledge and without noticing it, members of our congregation had given angry

glances which were successful, so successful that the families felt unwelcome here. Of course, one can dispute how much crying one can bear during the church service and one can dispute if some things that are said, or how one looks, are really meant that way. I am attempting now to prophesy, to speak clearly, but with love for both sides, when I say that we have to practice treating this problem by first recognizing clearly: We want families with children, also with small children. The other point is that we finally have to act on what we have been talking about for a long time, namely, that we find people who are willing to assist parents in their care for small children. Surely, when children are two years old, they need their parents, but I am certain that there is a way to let people know in a nice, loving way, and without an angry look or a silly remark, this is disruptive now. I always point out to parents that there is the nursery near the entrance and try, if there is an opportunity, to tell them that they should see if their children can last through the service or not. – This is not a big problem, and I do not want to make it a big issue, I just think it is a good example of how we deal with a matter with awareness, which – another idea of this text, should build community.

The word “edification” which means upbuilding appears in the text. It means, what it says: to build up something. It contains the word build and refers clearly to the building of community. Therefore, Paul emphasizes that one should not be preoccupied with oneself alone, as in speaking in tongue, which only has value for him who prays. But in the congregation we should take the trouble and care for one another. And that should also be expressed in the way we speak with to other.

This is the aim of prophecy: It founds community, it does not think of what one wants for oneself, but it searches for the good for all.

The Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard has once said: Wherever there is upbuilding, there is love, and wherever there is love, there is upbuilding.

It is surely not easy, to always prophesy, but it is the way in which a congregation renews itself, because it is being built constantly. – Upbuilding is what lets us grow.

Amen.

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.