

***It's Mutual – Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16***

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One day this past week, two women visited the church for the purpose of assessing our space for an event their employer is possibly interested in having here. It just so happened that one of them grew up in this church.

When they walked into the building, you could sense that, even though she's a young woman with her own family now, she felt she was back in her childhood home.

She hadn't been in the building in probably 20 years, and yet the look in her eye and the words she spoke indicated her possessiveness. This was her church.

We came into the sanctuary, and she pointed out where she and the rest of her family had sat when they worshipped here. And as she looked around the room, you could sense the memories coming back—good memories—the worship, the connections, the love she remembers experiencing here during her childhood.

I don't know if this is the right venue for the event she and her co-worker were scouting the facility for, but this child of Farragut Presbyterian really wanted it to be. I could tell. Such was the belief in what this church stood for and the impact it had on her life.

I didn't feel it appropriate in the moment to ask what faith community she's part of now, if she is connected somewhere. My prayer is that the hospitality we offered to her and her co-worker during their visit communicated a sense of welcome and

hospitality—equal to what she had experienced as a child of this church.

This summer, I had a similar experience when I was in my hometown and Laura and I worshipped with my mom at the church I grew up in. Lots of memories—memories of connection and belonging, along with a few familiar faces that still dot that church family. There was nostalgia but also the conviction of being shaped by a body of people who hold inclusion in the family of God as the most common denominator.

Community is important. It shapes us, it nurtures us, it sustains us amid tough times, it celebrates our success with us, it bridges change for us, and it pushes us to form tighter bonds with others.

Within a faith community specifically, members model discipleship for us, give us the freedom to be honest with God and each other, and make it easier for us to carry our own crosses in the world.

This community will endure when nothing much else often will.

The famous poet Robert Frost wrote a poem titled, “Nothing Gold Can Stay.”

The poem isn’t about the sort of gold stacked up in bank vaults. It is about tree buds in springtime that sprout a golden flower ever so briefly, before they become green leaves:

*Nature’s first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf’s a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,*

*So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.<sup>1</sup>*

It's the simplest of poems — even for Robert Frost, who is known for plain speaking and simple language. There isn't a word in it more than two syllables long; most are just one. The rhymes are simple, the meter almost sing-song.

Yet, this poem is more than a celebration of nature. Those simple words display a profound message most of us spend a lifetime living into. *Nothing gold can stay* — not on the springtime buds that soon mature into leaves; and not on those same leaves in autumn when they turn gold once again.

Frost wrote this little poem in mid-life after experiencing some terrible losses. Two of his children had died. He had lost both his parents and a close friend. He came to realize that things he valued in his youth were but golden illusions. “Nothing gold can stay.”

We cling to some golden illusions, too. The illusion that we will live forever, or that our loved ones will. The illusion that our diplomas on the wall, our power, or our investment accounts, or our towering homes confer our lasting status. But, nothing gold can stay.

What does stay is the love God has for us and the love we have for each other. And that love is stabilized and most often demonstrated in community, most prominently in communities of faith.

The verses of Hebrews 13 here are about the building of solidarity within our relationships—in this case, within the relationships that are formed and sustained within faith communities. And the writer says it pointedly in verse 1: “Let mutual love continue.”

All the exhortations about life in community that follow derive from this most foundational requisite: loving each other. And that means loving each other when it's *tough* to love each other.

- Within the broad context of human community, it's hard to love the stranger or the outcast—in this case in Hebrews 13 the prisoner. "Love them as though you are in prison with them," says the writer. Loving neighbor, as we all know, is not a suggestion but one of the two most important commands. And to love those who are different stretches us beyond what is comfortable.
- More narrowly, it's difficult to hold those closest to us with the complete devotion required. The writer uses the covenant of marriage as the best example of being completely devoted to those we pledge our allegiance to. "Let marriage be held in honor by all." There is no more intimate community than that of two people in marriage. It is the most sacred of all relationships. We always should guard against the temptation to defile it.
- Keeping our lives free from the love of money goes back to that *nothing gold can stay* theory. In the recognition that money, too, doesn't last, we turn to the primacy of loving those in our community. For, again, love endures. Love doesn't fail.

Loving the prisoner, loving your partner in the context of marriage, and being content with what we have are biproducts of this mutual love that the writer of Hebrews exhorts his listeners to exhibit. So, too, is Jesus' call to humility, seen through his exhortation to the invited guests at the wedding banquet in Luke

14 to take the lowest place at the table. For they would be exalted for their humble spirit.

Mutual love. And mutual love within the context of our communities—including our faith communities—is what can protect us and strengthen us in a very individualistic and me-centered world.

Social media today is dominated by people who are “content-creators” or “social influencers.” It’s all about them creating videos online so that people will watch them or listen to them. And most make money (some of them big money) for doing it.

Not all of them have impure motives. Some of them just want to share their opinions, their funny stories, or their talents. But many of them take advantage of the look-at-me culture we live in. It’s about receiving, not giving love. It’s about their getting their validation from others giving them their attention.

And loving mutually isn’t about that. Loving another is really first and foremost about what we give to another.

In his 1956 book, “The Art of Loving,” the psychoanalyst and philosopher Erich Fromm argued that love is not a feeling; it’s a practice, an art form. He wrote, “Love is the active concern for the life and growth of that which we love.” It’s a series of actions that requires discipline, care, respect, knowledge and the overcoming of narcissism. It’s a form of love, for example, to go downstairs and get someone a glass of water in the middle of the night, and it’s a great gift to ask for that water and give the other the opportunity to serve.

This kind of love is an outpouring. In this conception of love, feeling beloved is a byproduct two people receive *after* they have given themselves away to each other, most famously in the

context of marriage. In this view of love, self-centeredness is our main problem, and love is a delicious and demanding remedy.

Mutual love, mutual affection, is foremost about what we give. It's primary concern is about the love we give away, not what we receive.

In thinking about the murderous rampage this past week at the Catholic school in Minneapolis, I found myself wondering what would have turned the killer away from his heinous actions that took the lives of two children and injured so many others.

Yes, I've wondered where the community around him was, why somebody didn't take him under his wing, notice him, reach out to him, and give him a route to a different path. But the more I think about it, maybe he needed, just as much, an outlet for him to give himself to others. To realize that mutual love and a greater sense of purpose that comes with deeper relationships and community doesn't start by what you get but by what you first give.

In healthy communities, where we all long to be, loving is mutual. We give first and then receive because of it.

Our model for this is Jesus, whose love he gives never fails. ("I'll never leave you or forsake you," he said.) He gives to extremes in ways we never can, but he provides the model for how it is that communities work and can flourish.

Love mutually.