

## *Let Mutual Love Continue*

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON HEBREWS 13:1

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*Let mutual love continue. (Hebrews 13:1)*

**W**HAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SUCCESS AND FAILURE? In particular, how do you succeed in the face of great adversity? The answer to that question in the business world may point to the answer in life, and it may be as old as advice in a letter written nearly 2,000 years ago.

Not long ago, corporate executive and business columnist Harvey Mackay reported on a study aimed at discovering how people who became successful in business differed from those who didn't. The study looked at 400 executives who had made it to the top and 400 others who fell by the wayside. The single factor that distinguished those who succeeded from those who fell away is that those who rose to the top persevered.

"Adversity will come to every person at some time," Mackay wrote. "How you meet it, what you make of it, what you allow it to take from you and give to you, is determined by your mental habits. . . . It is easy to have a great attitude, a strong work ethic and a positive outlook when things are going great," Mackay continued. "But how do we stand up during tough times?"

Tough times come to all of us – personally, to our families and congregation, to our community and nation. When they come, how do we stand up? How do we meet adversity; what do we make of it; what do we allow it to take from us and give to us? How do we stand up when tough times come?

Tough times had come to the first readers of the letter to the Hebrews. They were laboring not only under the adversities we all face but a few others as well. Because of their faith they suffered public abuse and persecution, imprisonment, and the confiscation of their property, and they were struggling to persevere (Heb. 10:32-36). The writer reminded them of others who had suffered the same or worse (11:4-40) and of Jesus himself, who because he endured had been given a place close to God (12:1-2).

Then the writer offers advice about how to live in the face of such adversity, how to persevere through tough times, and it's some of the greatest advice in scripture: "Let mutual love continue" (13:1). As we face our own tough times, let mutual love continue.

The best definition of Christian love I've come up with is simply this: To love someone is to value that person. It is to believe that person has an essential role to play in God's purpose for creation, even if I don't know what that role is. It's to acknowledge that without that person my own life would be essentially diminished. And then it is to act toward that person accordingly. When tough times come, we need to remember that we need each other and that without any one of us something crucially important in life would be missing for all of us.

"Let mutual love continue," the writer advised. Love may be something we have to grow into; it is not something new to us. It was active in our lives before we were aware of it; it called us and drew us here before we heard its voice; and before we learn to reach out to others in love, love is already at work binding us together. It gave us our places in this congregation so that we can learn to live in it more deeply (Acts 17:26-28). John Wesley called it "prevenient grace," divine love that makes the first move in our lives to heal our relationship with God and with each other.

We don't need to learn how to express God's love; God's love is already expressing itself through us. What we need to learn is how to stop obstructing that love and let it flow through us more freely. To do that, one writer advised, "we must cease to wear our masks, stop pretending to be perfect, and accept the graces of growth that can come to us from the wise and gentle hearts of people of quality around us."\*

When tough times come, we must learn to take off our masks and open ourselves deeply to "the wise and gentle hearts of quality people around us," people in whose company God has placed us so that we may seek and find God.

When adversity comes, instead of becoming defensive, which would be a natural human reaction, we need to become proactive in love. We need to recognize and emphasize the God-given value each other person has, and we need to let that recognition guide our responses and govern our relationships. It's a joint affair, a community effort, a mutual endeavor. God has given us our places here so that we may learn how to let mutual love continue. It's the best company of people I know with whom to learn how to face adversity, how to persevere, how to succeed in life.

PRAYER: Let your love, O God, be the bias of my soul, the natural spring of my heart, and the one guide of my life. Amen. —from Bishop Thomas Ken (1637-1711)

\* Joan Chittester, interpreting St. Benedict's instructions on humility, in *The Rule of Benedict: Insight for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 61-75).