

“Love”

Introduction: If you were to close your eyes while our text for this morning is read, when you opened them up you might be looking around for a bride and a groom, a lot of flowers and a host of folk dressed up in dresses and suits! That’s because 1 Corinthians 13 is read so very often at weddings, and so we might be tempted to think that’s what this chapter is all about. But it’s not, at least initially. Paul’s words here are a model, to be sure, about what true love looks like, but they’re given in the context of a reprimand to a church that had lost its bearings, to a community of people who were in disunity and disarray and filled with self-promotion. They had forgotten what love is all about. Their notion of what true love is needed to be restored.

We’ll consider love this morning as we’ve been thinking about how our life together as followers of Jesus might need to be restored, particularly as we climb out of the “hole” of covid and all the challenges that has brought over the last couple of years. We’ve begun by reflecting on the all-important triad of faith, hope, and love that we find sprinkled throughout the NT, virtues that are to help us live well as citizen of the kingdom of God. Simply put, we might say that our faith is anchored in what God has done, in Christ, in the past; our hope looks forward to what God has yet to do; and so our love is how we are to live in the present while we await God’s new creation to come in its fullness.

In this chapter, Paul talks about the necessity of love, the nature of love, and the never-ending presence of love. He does so to a congregation which was planted in a fairly cosmopolitan city. Immigrants from all over the Empire had settled there. It was very diverse religiously, economically, and ethnically, and the church reflected this wide diversity. So, as they sought to follow Jesus and make their life together, it wasn’t always smooth sailing! How might Paul’s words speak to them, and to us? [READ]

I. The Necessity of Love (vv. 1-3)

A. We’re going to look at this text like a sandwich with two slices of bread representing the necessity of love and the never-ending presence of love, and in the middle, the meat of the sandwich, the nature of love. Let’s start with the bread, the top slice if you will: the necessity of love.

As chapter 13 opens, Paul has just finished sketching (chapter 12) the picture of the church as a body, with each member working together, exercising his or her spiritual gift. It’s where he makes the comment that all the body parts are necessary, that the head and hand and feet are all important. Even the parts that are smaller and seem weaker are indispensable. When one part suffers all suffer.

Illustration: I was reminded of this over the summer when I broke my toe. While it was my little toe, it’s amazing how much that thin, inch long part affects the rest of the body. While it was in pain, all of me was feeling pain! It needed to be healthy for me to walk, or hike, comfortably.

B. As Paul continues on, what he then emphasizes in chapter 13 is that if the body is to work well, it needs to be characterized by love. It does absolutely no good if one seeks to exercise a spiritual gift without it. As he explains, if the gift is enjoying an angelic prayer language called tongues, but it’s not accompanied by love, you’ll just be making useless noise. If the gift involves great powers of intuition, and a faith that accomplishes remarkable things, but it’s not accompanied by love, no one will

pay attention. If the gift involves great generosity of time, talent, and treasure, but it's not accompanied by love, your investment will have no return.

Illustration: One of the ways I've learned that I can affirm Rama is by removing my shoes when I come in the house so that I don't track dirt all over the place and ruin the good and hard work of cleaning she always does. However, like a couple of days ago, I can easily be in a hurry to run upstairs to fetch something I forgot, and as I head upstairs, even though my shoes are off, I start mumbling, and stomping up those stairs because removing my shoes has inconvenienced me. When that happens, I've lost the point. Even though my shoes are off out of duty, removing them without love does no good for my heart, or hers.

Love, we might say, is like the oil on a bicycle. You can have all the right components, put together in all the right ways, but without putting drops of oil in particular places, the bike won't perform well over the long haul, and you'll even begin to damage some of its parts. Love is the oil necessary for a community to function well. Before we think more particularly about what love looks like, let's go to the bottom half of the sandwich, the other slice of bread, and consider the never-ending presence of love.

## II. Never Ending Presence of Love (vv. 8-13)

A. Here, Paul returns to mentioning some of the spiritual gifts, and wants to make sure we know that as splendid as they are, not only are they nothing without love, but that they will not last. In fact, they were never intended to last. They will cease, they will be stilled, they will pass away, all, that is, except love. He uses a couple of images to make his point. One is that of a child, the other is looking into a mirror (they were manufactured in Corinth). Just as a child matures into adulthood, and seeing face to face provides a clearer picture, so is something more complete ahead.

B. So, the various spiritual gifts are useful for building up the church, but they're only temporary. Even now, the "big three" of faith, hope, and love are doing their work, but when God's new creation comes fully into being, we won't need faith because we'll have sight, and we won't need hope because it will have been fulfilled. But we will still have and need love. It is the greatest. It is never ending and will be what guides us and directs us as we live together in God's new world. So, we can conclude, we'd be wise to begin practicing and learning all about it now!

## III. The Nature of Love (vv. 4-7)

A. Let's then go to the middle section, to the meat of the sandwich, and consider how Paul describes the nature of love. Maybe the best one sentence description of love to get us going comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesian church:

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children, and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. – 5:1-2

We love because God has first loved us—we are dearly loved children—and so God gives us a "way" in which we are to walk, to live, and this way is modeled by Jesus. Ultimately, it is the way of sacrifice, the way of the cross, the way that seeks the good of another, which puts it at odds with the way love is understood in popular culture. In the culture that surrounds us, in print and on the screen, what we see and what we hear, love is portrayed as a feeling, something you fall into or out of. Love is seen as romantic and erotic. Love is used to describe what we enjoy doing.

B. But that's not the way Jesus modeled it, or Paul speaks of it. Paul talks about the nature of love in terms of what it does, and does not, do. His first two descriptors are positive: love is patient, love is kind. Both of these he elsewhere ascribes to God (Rom. 2:4). Both have the good of the other in mind. The next eight adjectives are cast in a negative way, in terms of what love is not, probably because they describe the kinds of things that were plaguing the Corinthians, as found elsewhere in the letter. Let's hear them again:

[Love] does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil...

The thread that runs throughout these descriptors is that they are self-centered actions, actions which do not seek the good of another.

Then, the final six return to the positive, to strong verbs that characterize the action of love, verbs that have the good of the other in mind:

[Love] rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

Love, we want to point out, does not mean unqualified acceptance. The love that rejoices with the truth must at times speak hard truth to those we love, or draw boundaries around their behavior, but always with the good of the other in mind.

B. In all of this, as he speaks of the nature love, what Paul is really doing is taking the church back to the cross and its self-giving character. If you read through chapter one, the cross was not a place this congregation wanted to be. The cross was a symbol of shame, of rejection, of degradation. It was a scandal, considered weak and foolish and an object of disgust, reserved for the worst of criminals. Many in the church evidently wanted to skip over all of that, to move right from Palm Sunday to Easter. But Paul wanted them to know that the cross was not only the means by which sin was forgiven, but it revealed the way of life, the way of love, that Christians are to live.

C. These verses, 4-7, might be good ones to commit to memory, to read through slowly, and to ask:

1. Which characteristics of love seem to come most naturally? Which do we struggle with?
2. Can we imagine how Jesus loves us in these ways, how he has been patient or kind or trustworthy to us, God's dearly loved children?
3. What would it look like for us to put these into practice, in our church, and then also in our conference rooms, our classrooms, our break rooms, our locker rooms, our living rooms, and yes, even in our marriages?

May our faith in what God has done, and our hope in what God will do fuel not only what God calls us to do, but *how* God calls us to do it – in love.