

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

January 30, 2022

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

If I asked you to name a Bible passage you most associate with a funeral service, I suspect the predominant answer would be Psalm 23. Similarly, if I asked you to name a Bible passage you most associate with a wedding, I suspect Paul's love hymn from 1st Corinthians would be at the top of the list. It is a beautiful, poetic passage that showcases ... well, of course, love. Nine times do we find the word. It's the love between two people that is celebrated on that special day. Thus, it seems like a fitting text for just such an occasion.

Yet, marriage was probably far from Paul's mind when he penned this letter from Ephesus to the church in Corinth. He's not writing marching orders to a couple about to embark on their life together. He's not talking about love we find in romance novels or played out frame by frame on the movie screen.

Paul is writing to a community of faith, which as we recall from last week, he compared to the body of Christ. Each part or person has unique gifts that are intended to build up the body. Each person has equal value. Together, connected to the body, the community is united. Paul is speaking to a congregation just as his letter continues to do so today. His marching orders are for the church.

And the church of Corinth was experiencing distress, division, and it seems power struggles amongst the members of the body. Pitting one's spiritual gifts above another's. Chapters 12-14 appear to be a sermon in and of itself as Paul talks about the variety of gifts the Spirit equips the body with. Some are apostles. Some are prophets. Some are teachers. Some speak in tongues. Some interpret and provide guidance. Some bring comfort and healing.

Chapters 12 and 14 specifically place greater emphasis on detailing these gifts, which have great value to the body. These gifts have the ability and purpose to manifest the presence of the living God not only in the community of faith but also in the world.

Chapter 13, caught in the middle, is the glue holding the bookends of chapter 12 and 14 together. It's the peanut butter between two slices of bread making the sandwich whole. It's the frosting in the middle of two chocolate cookies that makes it an Oreo.

Chapter 12 and 14 are all good and well, yet, without Chapter 13 and the gift of love made known in it, they are nothing. The community can have all these gifts. Some might be equipped with one, two or more. Yes, each have access to three. Each are equipped with three. Faith, hope and love and the greatest of all is love. Love will endure all things.

Put it another way, Paul might be saying to the Corinthian church. Hey, you can spend all the time in the world putting forth the best budget, building and maintaining the grandest of spaces to worship and speak in tongues, putting for preparations for the best of programs to teach and evangelize. It's all good and well; yet brothers and sisters without the core gift of love you have nothing.

It's been a challenging two years for the church in which it seems many congregations have had disagreements and even division on so many things such as whether to mask or not mask. Whether to open the building or close the building. Whether to invest more financial gifts into technology or not. There is uncertainty on how to move forward in what is a world we could never have envisioned.

In many ways, it's not that unlike what Paul was writing to. A community trying to understand itself and live into who they are. Trying to find their way in the swirling waters of unrest, uncertainty, and the unknown. Paul reminds them, he reminds us, amidst it all else, the church is to manifest love. The love made manifest to the church through the birth, death and resurrection of its head, Jesus Christ. The love of God made known in the Word made flesh. The love of God that manifests itself in reconciliation, forgiveness, and inclusivity. It's this love that urges us on. It's this love that fills the cracks of disagreement and division within the body. It's this love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It's this love that is to be manifest, made known, shine forth in and through the body of Christ.

Look in the mirror Paul seems to be saying. What is the reflection you see dear church? Is it love or is it something else? Are your combined gifts, interactions with one another, communal life casting the image of love? The image so needed in a world in which hate, greed, contempt for another, revenge upon another seems to have increased while compassion, kindness, and patience with another has decreased. The image Christ's desires his church to reflect. The image he himself set for us an example.

It's a beautiful love, but also often a love difficult to carry out in a complicated, messy, and broken world and people. As Jesus showed us. It will be met with rejection just as it was in his hometown. It will come with shame and scorn. It will entail pain. Yet, it is love of his Father and love for all humanity that urges him on. It is a love in which in moments of weakness and vulnerability makes itself most fully known.

This love is especially challenging to love out when there is disagreement, when there is hurt, and pain inflicted upon by another. It's challenging as the ways of the world reveal another way out that appears simpler if not celebrated at times. It's much easier to point a finger than it is to look in the mirror and admit perhaps we are the one that needs to be changed by love. It's much easier to move onto someone that thinks like us, looks like us, acts like us, sees like us than it is to be patient, understanding, and caring to one who is just the opposite. It's easier to reject than to find compromise. It's easier to bully than it is to accept and show mercy, compassion, and kindness. The temptation to find the quick and easy answer appears simpler than to rip the bandage off and make the long, arduous, painful journey through our disagreements and divisions to break through to the other side of in which love abounds and endures, hope dwells, and faith sustains.

Love is work. Patience, kindness and all the other hallmarks of love Paul speaks of are not adjectives. Not merely descriptors of the subject. No, these are verbs that might better be translated as such, "Love waits patiently" or "Love acts kindly." As Melanie Howard puts it, "the love that Paul is describing takes action, it is not a passive feeling toward another."ⁱ This is the hard part. It's much easier to attribute love as a passive action.

But Jesus did not live out a passive love. It crossed boundaries. It touched those thought to be untouchable. Loved those deemed to be unlovable. Ate with those that were deemed unworthy to be at the table. Called those who would later deny, abandon and coward in fear. Called and ate with tax

collectors and sinners. It met head on the forces of the world that defy God's will and sent them scrambling in fear and cast aside. Later in Luke, it is that love as Jesus hangs upon a cross which acted in saying, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they are doing." (23:34). Through forgiveness, one of Jesus' final acts of love, he reveals and chooses an action that defeats the evil cast upon him by those putting him to death. I wonder if those who heard were not transformed by these words of love.

People of God, we have access to the greatest gift of all. It is offered in the meal we are about to share. It is written on the pages of scriptures alive and abounding with God's love. It flows through the waters of our baptisms. It is made known through the death of our Lord and shines forth brilliantly when the stone is rolled away and his tomb is found empty and the angel reminds us, "He is not here. He has been raised."

Wherever you are, whoever you are, whatever it is you come with this morning, know you are loved by God who is love. God who loved us first. God whose love endures forever. God whose love knows no boundaries. God's love in which there is nothing we can do that will separate us from it. Look in the mirror of God and see you are created out of God's love. You are an image of that love. You are a vessel and beacon of that love. Your gifts were created to manifest that love to your neighbor, whom God also loves. You are part of the precious body of Christ, the church, which is held together by the greatest gift we strive for. Strive to live in every minute of our life together. Strive to show the world a better way. Strive to reveal that which will never end. Will always endure. Love! God's love. Christ's love. Alive in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ www.workingpreacher.org commentary on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Melanie A. Howard, January 30, 2022.