

What is Love?

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

¹ If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

So what is LOVE? It is difficult for us to hear 1 Corinthians 13 without thinking of white dresses, rented tuxedos, bouquets, unity candles, and all the other practices and paraphernalia that our culture uses to celebrate our romanticized notions about marriage. But how surprised the apostle Paul would be to discover that this most challenging and grace-filled ode to love has become a staple of marriage ceremonies! No wonder, given the absence of any reference to God or Jesus Christ in the text. If we are to get at its real theological meaning, we must place it back in Paul's letter and remind ourselves of the author's intention in addressing these words to the church in Corinth.

So what is LOVE? Apparently Paul had heard that some members of the Corinthian congregation were trying to enhance their status on the basis of their particular spiritual gifts. Does, this sound familiar? In our culture we

have every flavor of religion because one group says the spiritual gifts they practice are more meaning and special to God and to the church than the ones practiced by other groups. I believe that is why we have so many denominations in our world today. I also believe this is the source of many of our congregational conflicts and battles. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul had challenged this notion by asserting that all spiritual gifts are manifestations of the Spirit of God. He compared the church to a body of many and diverse members, each playing an essential role for the good of the whole. Then in 1 Corinthians 13, to make sure there were no lingering doubt about the foolishness of taking pride in one's knowledge or one's ability to speak in tongues or to prophesy, Paul claims that love trumps all other gifts.

So what is LOVE? If we read this passage outside the context of Paul's entire letter, it might seem that love is simply the best in a list of virtues, just another talent one might try to perfect; but read within the context of the letter, this love is a state of being. It constitutes that fundamental relationship to God without which we are "nothing." Paul wrote to a community of people to whom God's love has been revealed in Jesus Christ. Their love was a response to God's gracious love, and it was from this relationship of love that all their spiritual gifts spring.

So what is LOVE? The foundation for the love Paul wrote about was laid out at several points earlier in the letter. For example: God "is the source of your life in Christ Jesus;" "So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth;" and "Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." The love Paul has in mind in today's scripture is the reality of God's presence in our lives and the very basis of our humanity.

So what is LOVE? For Paul, our capacity to flourish as human beings is realized to the extent that we can live in the love of God revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ. The concrete reality of this divine love is present in our lives as described where love is the subject, actively expressing itself in patience and kindness, rejoicing in the truth, and bearing, believing, hoping, and enduring all things. This love is not envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, irritable, or resentful, nor does it insist on its own way. We might ask if such love is humanly possible. As an individual character trait or a personal attitude, the answer is "no;" but as the presence of God's love in Christ crucified and in a community of believers that live in that love, the answer is "yes." To belong to God's church in Corinth was to be an agent of God's love in the world, not seeking one's own advantage, but working on behalf of others.

So what is LOVE? That this is no ordinary love, that it is not simply on a par with the spiritual gifts, is evident in the permanence Paul claims for it. Prophecy, speaking in tongues, and knowledge not only bear the imperfection and partiality of the present age; "they will come to an end." But "Love never ends;" in its present reality it manifests the age to come. "For now we see in a mirror, dimly; but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." Having told us, especially those of us who are preachers and teachers, that "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" in chapter 8, Paul now tells us that our dim, mirror like sightings will one day become face-to-face visions, that our partial knowledge will become full. Paul makes this claim in the context of God's love. If our quest for knowledge, whether through science or theology, is rooted in that love, then the knowledge we seek is of the one who already knows us fully.

So what is LOVE? The love described in our scripture is a love we experience as God's unshakable grasp upon our lives. It is the source of our greatest security and, therefore, our freedom to actually be *patient* and *kind*, to *bear all things* and not *insist on our own way*. In his book about ethics in the age of genetic engineering, Harvard professor Michael Sandel writes eloquently about the giftedness of life and the dangers that come with our heightened sense of mastery. Paul is raising similar issues in the church in Corinth, as we must in our own church and in the larger world, where insisting on our own way wreaks havoc with other peoples, not to mention the natural environment. (**Jerry Irish**)

So what is LOVE? In his pastoral role, Paul admonishes and exhorts the Corinthian Christians with a simple command: practice love. Love is not another spiritual gift, but the way in which God intends us to practice all of our gifts. In this passage, Paul speaks about the primacy of love, the character of love, and the endurance of love.

So what is LOVE? In every congregation and in every human life, there are spoken and unspoken assumptions about what is most important. The church is full of diverse viewpoints about God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit; practices, programs, small groups, organizations, missions, and specialized ministries. For much of the time, there is room in the church for this diversity to coexist peacefully. When resources of people, space, time, and money are scarce, tensions can arise, and unspoken assumptions are sometimes verbalized in hurtful and divisive ways. Social and cultural concerns press upon the church and lead some within the church to insist on their own way. But in love we seek common purpose and common ministry for the good of all, for those a part of our fellowship and those outside our fellowship.

So what is LOVE? These words of Paul on love were meant to help the Corinthian church in conflict understand that there are some things more important than being right or powerful or honored. If those within the church do not do what they do in a spirit of love, then all the religious talk, knowledge, piety, and sacrificial giving add up to nothing. Without love, Christians are like the salt Jesus described as having lost its savor and not good for anything except being "thrown out and trampled under foot." Those of us who think we have gained everything by standing on principle, dominating others, or by being right, have lost it all.

So what is LOVE? Paul also speaks about the character of love. Christians are bombarded every day with countless and often conflicting images and ideas of love. We need to remember that Paul is speaking about *agapē*, the love embodied most visibly in God's love for humankind in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This love is not so much about feeling, but action. This love seeks not its own good, but the good of the one who is loved. Paul defines this love in a series of words that depict what love is and what love is not. Both the negative and the positive descriptions of *agapē* convict those of us with ears to hear of our lack of love, misunderstanding of love, and corruption of love. Paul's description of the character of love awakens us to the transformation and renewal of love in the body of Christ.

So, what is LOVE? In light of Paul's compelling description of love, we need to examine how we carry out our ministry of pastoral care, our mission in the community, and our organizational leadership. According to Paul, as we engage in pastoral care we are not to become irritable and impatient when those receiving care do not change or conform to our expectations. Well-meaning but misguided ministries make us think we know what is best

for others and we can become frustrated when others do not immediately respond to our efforts to assist. When we participate in the Carriage Town Ministries do we think when we see some of the same people year after year that they are just not motivated to do better. Do we say they should pull themselves up by their boot traps? Do we truly join in a respectful partnership with others as we listen together for the Spirit's guidance and leading? Paul implies that we need to participate in training to exercise leadership in a spirit of love that seeks the good of all and rejoices when the broadest understanding of truth is reached? There is nothing sentimental about the image of love that Paul sets before the church. Such love is active, resilient, and long-suffering.

What is love? Paul ends his pastoral words about love with a picture of the endurance of love. Every spiritual gift will end. All the monuments humans create will crumble away. Even human life will come to an end. In this life, human beings are given the opportunity to grow in love, from childhood to adulthood and from immaturity to full spiritual maturity. There is a beautiful irony in the fact that the one thing that lasts forever is the love that is given away. Even though no person can make complete sense of all of his or her experiences in this world or see clearly what lies beyond this world, each person can trust in the permanence and persistence of divine love lived and experienced in human life. In an anxious world that grasps for the permanent, the eternal is given through the experience of love. When the church gathers to celebrate the resurrection at the time of death, the pastor and people have the opportunity to witness to the truth that the legacy that matters most is love. The faithful life is one that gives testimony in word and deed to the primacy of love, the character of love, and the endurance of love.

(Lewis F. Galloway)

What is love? Paul describes love in ways that correspond to issues that are found in any church. Love does not envy, but envy and strife characterize the Corinthians. Love does not boast, but the Corinthians did. Love is not puffed up, but the Corinthians were. Love is not self-seeking, but this was not true for those making trouble. Love does not delight in injustice, but some Corinthians manipulate unjust courts. So, love is an antidote to many of the problems that plague the church. (**Christopher R. Hutson**)

Let's pledge to do everything in love. Let's give in love. Let's pray in love. Let's sing in love. Let's minister in love. Let's live in love. For God has shown us through Jesus what love is really all about!

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