

“All You Need is Love”
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New Testament Lesson - 1st Corinthians 13:1-13 (NRSV)

13 ¹If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And 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. ³If 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.

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

⁸Love 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. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When 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. ¹²For 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. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Old Testament Lesson - Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (NRSV)

⁴Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.



Our New Testament passage this morning is a familiar one. You’ve probably heard it before in the context of a wedding ceremony. It’s been a part of every wedding I’ve officiated except one. In fact, today is the first time I have ever preached this text outside of a wedding.

It is commonly referred to as “the Love Chapter,” for what would seem to be obvious reasons. But what Paul describes as love is very different from what we so often see reflected in our culture. For example, if you search the word “Love” on I-Tunes, you get literally hundreds of song titles; an amazing array of songs that express a wide range of thought and opinion on the subject:

For instance, The Four Aces’ sang that “Love is a Many Splendored Thing,” and The Captain and Tenille declared that “Love, Love Will Keep Us Together” but Pat Benatar countered with “Love is a Battlefield,” while the J. Geils Band argued that, in fact, “Love Stinks (yeah, yeah).”

There’s One Love (Bob Marley), Modern Love (David Bowie), Jungle Love (Stevie Miller), Endless Love (Lionel Richie/Mariah Carey), and Muskrat Love; Not to mention The Sea of Love (Honey Drippers), Summer Love (Justin Timberlake), A Crazy little Thing called Love (Queen), and Love Potion #9.

Robert Palmer was “Addicted to Love,” Beyonce Knowles was “Crazy in Love,” and The Black Eyed Peas asked “Where is the Love?”

And while Ray Charles was singing “I Can’t Stop Loving You,” George Jones was countering with “He Stopped Loving Her Today,” and George Strait was reminding us that “You Can Lead A Heart To Love But You Can’t Make It Fall.”

Of course, the best of them all is the Beatles who reminded us that in the end “All You Need Is Love.”

Each speaks to some element of the experience of loving another, but none truly captures the essence of what Paul is writing about here because of one very important thing: there’s a profound difference between *feelings* and *actions*. Love songs are about how we feel, but for Paul, love is something else entirely.

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Let us first place Paul’s “Love Chapter” within its proper context. Chapter 13 is a continuation of the argument Paul began in Chapter 12.

Last week Laura preached on 1st Corinthians 12 in which Paul writes eloquently about the gifts of the Corinthians and the fact that all of them are important to Christ’s church. Like the parts of the body, all people and all gifts in the church have value and should be honored. Rather than seek to possess the best gifts, Paul says, you must recognize your own gifts and use them for the glory of the church. All of you are important and all of your gifts, no matter how small and seemingly insignificant, are important.

“But,” he goes on to say (and this is where we pick up in chapter 13), “if you don’t use your gift in a *loving* way, then it doesn’t matter how impressive that gift is, it is useless.” And in the first few verses of chapter 13, we can see Paul almost being a little sarcastic, challenging his readers about how they use those very important gifts discussed in the last chapter:

- You can speak in tongues? He says. Great. But if you don’t use that gift of tongues in a *loving* way then it’s just noise.

- You have prophetic powers and can understand all mysteries? You have knowledge, and faith to move mountains? Wow. That is impressive, but if that gift is not used lovingly, then it’s nothing.

-You can give away everything you have like Jesus asked the rich young man to do? You can even give your whole body and die like Jesus did on the cross? Awesome. But if you are doing that to build yourself up and not as an act of love, you will gain nothing.

Paul makes the point here that even though all gifts are important and all people are important in the life of the church, what is most important, is love. Everything we do must be done as an act of love or it is not worth doing.

“Well wait a minute,” his readers might have said (And Paul writes his next lines as if they did), “what does love look like? How do I exercise my gift of, let’s say great knowledge... in love?”

And in answering that implied question, Paul gives us one of the most sublime passages of scripture in all the canon: *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends.*

And what's really interesting is that most of these things Paul says love is, are things that he has already chastised the Corinthian church about earlier in his letter.

For instance back in chapter 5, verse 6, Paul wrote: "Your boasting is not a good thing."
 And in 4:18 he says "some of you... have become arrogant."
 And in 6:8 he writes "You, yourselves wrong and defraud."

So in part, Paul answers the implied question "What is love?" with a summary of all of his criticisms of the Corinthian Church. "What is Love? It is all of these things that I have shown that you are not." Oh, there were some toes stepped on in the congregation *that* day.

But it is also a charge to *actively* love one another through ALL of the things that you do. So Paul is saying that **WHATEVER** you do, do it as an act of love and what I mean by that is this: do *everything* with patience and kindness. Do it without envy, or boasting or arrogance or rudeness. Do it selflessly, not insisting on your own way. Do it without being irritable or resentful. And whatever you do, let that act be a celebration of truth and not wrongdoing. And finally, let whatever you do be done with endurance because love does not falter beneath the weight of our burdens and it never quits.

For Paul, love is key. You all have gifts and you are all important but the most important thing, the highest virtue, is that whatever you do should be an act of love. Now where have we heard that before? Paul didn't come up with this on his own.

In Matthew 22:34-40 and again in Luke 10:25-37 we find accounts of Jesus being challenged by an expert in the law who asked of Jesus, what is the greatest of all the laws? The answer given is "All of the law and the prophets is summed up in this: that you love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself (Luke version)."

But that notion even predates the time of Jesus for the command to Love God is found in Deuteronomy 6 and the command to love your neighbor as yourself is found in Leviticus 19. So Paul has actually directed the people of Corinth to the most ancient of Israel's laws.

And in Matthew 5:43-44, Jesus expands that command to include our enemies saying "You have heard it said 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."

While loving God might seem easy, to be truthful, we have always struggled with the commands to love neighbor and enemy. When I discuss this with students inevitably someone asks "what about Osama bin Ladin or Adolph Hitler? Am I supposed to love them, too?" Why people always go for the most extreme example possible is beyond me. It's pointless to worry about loving bin Laden because you're never going to meet him. But the point is well taken: how are we to love those who are so very unlovable?

Which brings us back to where we started. So many of our ideas about love are focused on how we *feel* about one another, but if you go back and re-read 1st Corinthians 13, you will find that Paul never says anything about how you *feel*. For Paul, love is not about your opinion of one another or your experience of one another or your feelings for or against one another.

For Paul, love is always about what **WE** do and how **WE** act towards one another.

And there is nothing greater, no virtue, no goal, no desire, no accomplishment, no end that stands before Love.

As is typical of the gospel, that is to us both comfort and challenge. It is comfort in that it lets us off the hook a little bit. That person who has wronged us; against whom we hold a grudge; the one for whom it is almost impossible to conjure up any positive feelings: Jesus commands us to love even that one, and Paul tells us that loving that person is indeed possible, even if we do not feel affectionate toward him or her.

Will Rogers famously said "I never met a man I didn't like." That's all fine and good, but it is unrealistic to expect that we should like every person we meet. There are too many of us and we have far too many different personalities, view-points, and backgrounds for that to be possible. But what *is* realistic, is that we treat everyone we meet with patience and kindness and selflessness and humility. Many of you will remember when Brother Micah, came to Clemson. An itinerant street preacher, Brother Micah often draws large crowds of onlookers, not because what he says is so compelling, but because so many people are offended by what he says that they just want to shout back at him.

Last year, when Micah came to Clemson, I got a call from one of our students who was upset with the things Micah was saying to passing students, telling some of them they were fornicators and whores or drug users or simply smokers who were apparently, all going to hell.

Behind the student, I could hear a roar of voices as other students yelled back their own scriptural interpretations and their own unflattering comments about Brother Micah and his ideas. The student who called was audibly upset and asked "What can we do?" I think he wanted me to give him a scriptural silver bullet that he could fire at Brother Micah to shut him up once and for all. But my answer to him that day was this: walk away. Your call is to love even the unlovable. And while you can't control what HE does, you can control what YOU do. So the most loving thing you can do for Brother Micah, is walk away.

Does that mean we shouldn't disagree; that we should always walk away from a fight? No, but *everything* we do should be done in love... even standing up to injustice. Remember, Mohandes K. Ghandi led a revolution that freed India from the shackles of the mighty British Empire without ever firing a shot, and his ideas about passive resistance and civil disobedience inspired Martin Luther King Jr. who helped lead a similar non-violent revolution in this country; a revolution that met violence with love.

You see, the Love that Paul challenges us to live by is not just sentiment and emotion, but a way of living that is patient and kind and selfless and humble.

That Love leads us to interact with friends and family and customers and employees and strangers on the street in a way that is patient and kind.

It leads us to do our work and pursue our vocations and our goals in a way that is not envious or boastful or arrogant.

It leads us to argue and disagree in a way that is not rude or insistent on its own way.

It leads us to serve the poor and the disadvantaged in a way that is not irritable or resentful.

It leads us to work for justice in a way that does not rejoice in wrong-doing, but rejoices in the truth

It leads us to never stop regardless of what other people do, because love bears all, believes all, hopes all, and endures all. Love never ends.

And that is a challenge for us because it necessarily means giving up some of our power. And that's what Paul was getting at with the Corinthian Christians. They liked their great gifts because it gave them power, and they didn't appreciate the simpler gifts because they were not as empowering. But the example Christ sets for us is one of power made perfect in weakness. Christ exhibited his power, by sacrificing for others; in loving other people, he made himself vulnerable.

Booker T. Washington, former slave and famous African-American educator and political leader, recounted in his autobiographical writings a story of his own experience of such love. He writes:

“The most trying ordeal that I was forced to endure as a slave boy... was the wearing of a flax shirt... That part of the flax from which our clothing was made was largely refuse, which of course was the cheapest and roughest part. I can scarcely imagine any torture, except perhaps, the pulling of a tooth that is equal to that caused by putting on a new flax shirt for the first time. It is almost equal to the feeling that one would experience if he had a dozen or more chestnut burrs, or a hundred small pin-points, in contact with his flesh. Even to this day I can recall accurately the tortures that I underwent when putting on one of these garments... But I had no choice... my brother John, who is several years older than I am, performed one of the most generous acts that I have ever heard of one slave relative doing for another. On several occasions when I was being forced to wear a new flax shirt, he generously agreed to put it on in my stead and wear it for several days, 'till it was 'broken in.'”¹

I like that story because Washington's older brother had nothing to gain by breaking in his little brother's shirt. If anything, the privilege of being the eldest should have allowed John to pass on such a burden. But love endures all things.

And that is what Paul is calling the Corinthian Church to and it's what we are invited to accept: the call and the challenge to love God and one another, even the ones we don't like very much, even the ones we call “enemy” not for what it will bring us, and not because it will make us feel good, but because in the end, that's all there is.

All that we have and all that we are will pass away, but love alone remains.

So maybe there is at least *some* truth in all that popular music we listen to after all. I mean, in the end maybe the Beatles were right... all you need *is* love.

To God be all grace, honor, glory, and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

¹ Larson, Craig Brian, ed. Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI 1993, pg. 172