

1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic powers, and I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at the wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect, and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up my childish ways, For now, we see with a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love, abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. Amen.

The Greatest of These Is Love

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

What I read in Paul's letters hardly makes church sound like much fun. From what we can tell, in the first century Paul started several congregations around the shores of the Mediterranean Sea – in places like Corinth and Thessalonica and Phillipi. But it seems that in making his circuit among the churches, no sooner had Paul left one church to go to another before things began to fall apart in the place he just left. And nowhere was that more true than in Corinth. In his first letter to the church in Corinth Paul writes to the congregation about the problems that have been reported to him. People from Corinth have brought him news of what is happening back in the Corinthian church. Members in the congregation are openly practicing incest. Congregants are suing one another in the courts of law. Others are fighting each other over what kinds of food should be eaten. Some are turning the Lord's Supper into a drunken party. And others in the congregation think they are better than everyone else because they are smarter or more pious, or they seem to have more spiritual gifts. They are fighting over which of them is most important: the prophesiers, the speakers in tongues, the teachers, the people who own the houses in which they are meeting, or the people with leadership titles. Oh my goodness, in comparison to the church in Corinth, North Prospect Union Church is a place of sublime peacefulness. I thank God that you are you and not Paul's church in Corinth.

And since we are so different, it may be hard for us to understand, it may be hard for us to benefit from what Paul is trying to teach the Corinthians. But, let's give it a try anyway. As different as we are from the Corinthian Church, I just can't help but wonder if Paul maybe has a word for us this morning.

We join Paul toward the latter part of the letter, at chapter 13, that well-known and beautiful tribute to love. Its words are found in weddings and funerals alike, which gives testimony to not only its beauty, but to its centrality to describing a Christian life. And yet, like so many things that are both well-known and important, there remains opportunity to deepen our understanding of it.

To understand the profound meanings of First Corinthians 13, one must necessarily understand a bit about the two chapters on either side of it.

In chapter 12 Paul is addressing the persistent bragging and jealousy that there is in the community. Some people think they are better or more important than others. Some are smarter. Some seem to have greater mystical prowess. Some contribute more money. Some own the meeting places. Some have titles. Some do more around the church. And apparently the factions are all whispering to each other and about each other. And sometimes it's louder than whispering. Now, I know it's pretty far-fetched to think that anything like this ever happens in a church, so you'll have to use your imagination. At the church in Corinth there's a lot of murmuring going on, as Genesis would say.

Paul's answer to the Corinthians is really quite simple. But it's elegant and brilliant, too. Paul says, look, the church is like a body, and a body has many parts, and it needs all its parts to work correctly. Hear Paul:

As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

In the chapter following First Corinthians 13 Paul makes his point even more clear. Three separate times he says that whatever is done in the church must be done to build up the community, to build up the church, not individuals, not me, not you, but the whole church. Paul concludes his argument with these words:

What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up [the church].

It is in between these chapters, in between the necessity of the many parts of the body and the necessity that all things must be done to build up, not tear down, the body, the church, it is in between these that Paul offers the hymn of love. He says love is the only way to get it all done. According to Paul, love is the only way that anyone can be a true contributor to building up the body of the church. Other things are important, but without love everything else is hollow and useless. In fact, without love, the body will inevitably fall apart.

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Now it should be clear that this is not romantic love that Paul is talking about, or at least it's not the kind of infatuation that we mean when we say we are in love. That's why I love to read this passage at weddings and funerals. I wonder how many brides and grooms look into each other's eyes and understand the deep meaning of Paul's words, way beyond the throbbing heart? I guess that a lot of the time infatuation wins the day at weddings. But I don't wonder what wins the day at the funeral service, or at times of other loss. For in gathering up the threads of a life or a loving relationship now painfully gone from us, as we stand face to face with death and loss, we are most often acutely aware that all that has really mattered is our answer to the question, how well have we loved? And all that will really matter going forward is, how well will we love. On those days when we mark life's inevitable endings, how well have we loved will determine our legacy. Oddly, that's why I read this passage at weddings. My hope is that First Corinthians 13 will convey enough of its full meaning at the wedding so that at the other end of things the grief will be washed in the soothing appraisal that yes, we did love well. And the evidence will be lives lived in building up relationships, not tearing them asunder, lives lived building up the body, not tearing it down.

But of course, these are not words only, or even primarily, for weddings and funerals. According to Paul, the words describe the ways in which we are to be together in our lives, in our communities, not the least, and maybe most especially, the community of the church. According to Paul, the primary business we have in the church, in the body of Christ, is to build up the community that all of us may be edified, that all of us may find God in this place.

And Paul tells us exactly how it works. He tells us exactly what this love looks like. “Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude.” Paul goes on, “Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.” And then he says, “[Love] does not rejoice at the wrong, but rejoices in the right.” And more, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

What a place Paul describes. There can hardly be any doubt that if we were all to love in the way that Paul describes, the community, the church and our relationships would certainly be built up, certainly be made stronger, certainly be better. Of that there can be no doubt.

But, I do have one lingering doubt. I want to ask, at what cost? What is the cost of all this loving others, all this patience and kindness, all this not insisting on my own way and bearing all things? If I do it, all this loving kindness, patience, tolerance and the rest, aren't I going to be a drained, beaten down, doormat kind of person? I mean, after all, isn't that why it's so hard to do these things Paul suggests? Speaking for myself, I often find myself reluctant to sacrifice myself and my happiness so that others can be built up and happy.

But then Paul smiles a little, because he knows it doesn't work that way; he knows that I get it backwards. He knows that "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." He knows that "If I have prophetic powers, and I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."

The secret that Paul wants to let us in on is that love is the only way we ourselves can be built up just as much as it is the only way the church or our relationships or the community can be built up. It's not a zero sum game. It's not a glass of water that only goes so far. It's like that living water that Jesus offered the Samaritan woman at the well. The more of love you give, the more there is and the more of it you will have. The greatest of these is love. This is the secret to life. Amen.