

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 8.23.2020



## Enduring

**The Reverend Pen Peery**

1 Corinthians 13

Five weeks ago we began a sermon series on love. Each Sunday we have explored a different text that gives us an insight into the love that God has for us and the love that we are to have for one another. Today's passage is one you will have heard before...I am reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 13. The Apostle Paul is writing to members of his church. Listen with me for God's word to us today

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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. 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. 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.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in



wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 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. 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

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I would venture that about 98% of the times I have read this passage from 1 Corinthians there has been a nervous couple with sweaty palms standing in front of me. I have to confess that this is one of those passages of Scripture that is so familiar I often miss the details. It runs the risk of feeling generic. The prelude to the main event.

The voice of the priest in the wedding scene from the movie classic, *The Princess Bride*, comes to mind: Maw-wadge. Maw-wadge is what brings us together today...Wuv, true wuv, will follow you forever.

These are just the words that the people wearing robes say before we get to the heart of the matter – where we make things official with vows and rings.



I remember when I was 25 and standing next to my 22-year-old bride-to-be. And when I say I remember, I don't mean I remember what Scripture was read, or what the preacher said. What I remember is that I didn't have much of a clue about what it meant to love someone in plenty or in want, joy or in sorry, sickness and in health.

The late Episcopal priest John Claypool often used his wedding sermon to address the soon-to-be wedded couple in ways that shook them out of their nervous haze and caught their attention. He would say: "There will be times when one, or both of you, do not want to be married anymore. And when that happens, I want you to remember what it feels like to be in this room full of people who love you and want good things for you. We are with you."<sup>1</sup>

Rev. Claypool gets the point. Because the kind of love that Paul writes about – a love that does not insist on its own way, a love that is not irritable, resentful, or rude, a love that bears all things, believes all things...endures all things – that kind of love isn't just for two people to practice with one another; it is meant to be practiced in a community – a wider group of people – that is where love has the chance to make the most impact.

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Paul didn't write these words for weddings. He wrote them for a church community that echoed the very colorful and diverse population of the city it called home.



Corinth is in Greece and was a commercial and religious hub. 100 years before Paul visited, Julius Caesar repopulated the city with retired military and freed prisoners from an overpopulated Rome. In Paul's time, Corinth had grown to become a place known for its mixture of nationalities, socio-economic backgrounds, education, and experience of faith. As you might imagine – in a place with so much difference, things did not always go smoothly. That's precisely why Paul wrote a letter to the church in Corinth; he had heard that his diverse congregation was having some trouble treating each other with respect and dignity and he wanted to see them take a different approach.

It's one thing to encourage a couple or a family to practice a love that is patient and kind...that doesn't insist on its own way...that is not irritable or resentful. I'm not sure about you, but that doesn't exactly describe the dynamic that's been playing out in my house over the past five months.

Now think about the challenge of encouraging people to practice that kind of love who don't even like each other that much...or who have a history of mistreating or being mistreated...or who reflected the brokenness and inequality of the world.

We know how hard that is, right?

We who live in a city and a country that kind of sounds a bit like Corinth, does it not? With an increasing mixture of backgrounds and experiences?

Just take a stock of how we often treat one another across lines of difference.

How respectful we are when we disagree.



How good it feels to prove our point at the expense of another.

That was Paul's church.

And what Paul believed about the church – about the people...of all stripes and ideologies and backgrounds...who made up the congregation – what Paul believed is that all of those people belonged to each other because – together – they were the body of Christ.

That's the point Paul made in the chapter that immediately precedes what we heard today. "You are the body of Christ," Paul said, "and individually, members of it."

My friend Joe Clifford notices that Paul wasn't asking his church to affirm that statement. He wasn't saying "you have the option of being the body of Christ if you want to be." Or, "some of you are included in the body, but not the wrong-headed, or the annoying ones." No – Paul was simply declaring a fact. "You ARE the body of Christ."

This what it means to be a member of a community of faith: Those who are part of the community belong to one another. They are a part of one another's lives... and futures. And, collectively, they bear witness to the one who is the head of the church – Jesus the Christ.

Paul's point to these cantankerous members who just couldn't seem to find a way to get along was that they really didn't have a choice. They belonged together – difference and all.



And so they needed to practice “a more excellent way” to live together.

The love that Christ has for us is what needed to be on display in the church bore his name.

That is why Paul said that love was more important than any accolade or accomplishment or knowledge or heroic act of faith.

Jesus didn't die so that we could have power.

Jesus didn't die so that we could revel in our own righteousness.

Jesus didn't die so that we could show off how learned and sophisticated we had become.

Jesus didn't die so that we could arrogantly compare ourselves to others in the human family.

No – Jesus died so that we might have life. And that we might be love. And that we might bear light – to a world that is desperate for it.

For Paul, he knew in his bones that when people looked at the church, and how the individual members of the church treated one another...how they managed their collective life together...how they cared for and supported one another...Paul knew that when people looked in on the church of Jesus Christ, they must see love. They must see an alternative to the world around them. Where it was obvious that everything else was relative...less important...than faith, and hope, and especially love.

That's why Paul wrote his letter.



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I'm not naïve enough to believe it is easy to love in the ways that Paul encourages. But I do think understanding that we are all connected can lead to a shift in mindset.

My friend Elizabeth Goodrich shared a story from the Jesuit priest and author, James Martin. Martin tells of a Jesuit brother, St. Alphonsus, who lived in the 16th century. For forty-six years, this learned monk served at the Jesuit college in Majorca, Spain, in the humble job of a porter, or doorkeeper. Martin writes, "His duty was to receive the visitors who came to the college, search out the fathers or students who were wanted in the parlors, deliver messages, run errands, console the sick at heart who, having no one to turn to, came to him, give advice to the troubled, and distribute alms to the needy.' St. Alphonsus was devoted to finding God in the present moment. "Lord, let me know you, and let me know myself," he would pray. Each time the bell rang, he looked to the door and envisioned it was God himself who was standing outside seeking entrance. On his way, he would say, "I'm coming, Lord!"

To be in a community of faith is to see one another as God sees us. To answer the door, or the phone, or the email with the expectation that God is on the other side. When Paul encourages us to love, he is not being pie-in-the-sky, but, rather, concrete. He lays out what love looks like.

To love is to be patient – with one another and ourselves.



To love is to be kind – with our words, attitudes, and actions.

To love is to be humble – so that we move out of the center of the frame and leave room for God to be at work.

A millennia-and-a-half after Paul wrote these words to encourage the Christian community in Corinth, Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, systematized some of Paul's work in a set of spiritual practices designed to help believers live in intentional community. They have held up over time. My friend Elizabeth lifts up four that speak to me today:

Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises begin with the advice that we "ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor's intent than to condemn it." That is to say: We want to be judged by our intentions, not by our actions, and so we should do the same for others.

For friendship or any other loving relationship to thrive, neither the friendship or the friend can be viewed as a possession. We should not try to control or manipulate our friends or family. Instead, there must be a certain freedom in friendship. Freedom to be one's true self, freedom to change, freedom to move.

Healthy friendships are marked by honesty, openness to challenge, and, most importantly, wishing the good of the other.

Ignatius spoke of Christians as being "sinners loved by God." This translates to "sinners loved by friends." Friends see our gifts, strengths and limitations in ways





that we do not, and the reflection of ourselves that we find in the love of our friends is probably the closest we come to developing a sense of how we are loved by God as well.

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These spiritual practices, these familiar words, this continual encouragement, (even this six-week sermon series on love)...here's why it matters for us: we need to model a different way of living to the world.

I am mindful that today we stand in-between the Democratic and Republican national conventions and at the headwaters of another Presidential election that will likely exacerbate and expose our political leanings and preferences.

In this pandemic, we are all living with (and constantly internalizing) stress: stress of the unknown, stress of a disruption of our routines, stress that results from isolation, stress about our health or the health of family.

Particularly, we all have a sense of economic uncertainty – with some of us feeling that acutely through lost jobs or diminished wages, and others bracing ourselves for the long-term impact.

Add to that, a social upheaval and awakening on matters of race that is creating calls for much-needed change, and also conflict.

Any one of these factors presents a test for how we will treat one another. Taken together, the test looms large.



And this is where the church of Jesus Christ has a real opportunity.

I am grateful that both First United and First Presbyterian Churches have built a long legacy of connection as Christ's body...where love has been a hallmark; a defining characteristic of our life together.

I believe we are entering a season in time when our church's witness will be incredibly important; where the ways we treat one another as members of Christ's body can offer the world around a vision of what is possible by God's grace.

And – even as we adapt how we are connected to one another through a pandemic that keeps us distant – the opportunity remains:

To practice love.

To prioritize it over all else.

To allow love to transcend difference.

To let love guide us into a future that we may not see, but that we can trust because it is promised by God.

What an enduring witness that would be, my friends.

May it be so.

Amen.

<sup>1</sup>With thanks to the Rev. Elizabeth Goodrich, whose 2015 Well paper on this text helped to shape this sermon.

