

The Church as Training Ground

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
February 3, 2019

- 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (New International Version) ¹ If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.
- 1 John 4:7-10, 16b (Good News Translation) ⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, because love comes from God. Whoever loves is a child of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ And God showed his love for us by sending his only Son into the world, so that we might have life through him. ¹⁰ This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven.... ^{16b} God is love, and those who live in love live in union with God and God lives in union with them.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Christ's church is where we are taught and where we practice the traits of divine love.

1 Corinthians 13. One of the most familiar and beloved passages in the New Testament. In my experience it's probably the scripture reading most requested by brides and grooms. I know it was read at our wedding (although I had to ask my wife because I couldn't remember for sure!). As part of a marriage ceremony it's almost a "no-brainer" because of its lofty yet practical description of the characteristics of a love that is mature and committed.

But that brief, thirteen-verse chapter was not written with "flowers and kisses and frilly wedding dresses"¹ in mind. Paul didn't write it in praise of the romantic love that sparks couples' dreams and moves them to make lifelong vows. There's certainly not anything wrong with reading it that way – the passage *does* capture the joy, the warmth, the possibility that surrounds a couple as they launch themselves into a life of married companionship.

¹ Richard B. Hayes, Interpretation – a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1997, 231

It might surprise you to learn that Paul wrote those lovely words as a form of discipline for poor behavior. This section of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was written with the express intent of trying to redirect the Corinthian Christians away from some selfish, inconsiderate behavior. You see, the Corinthian church was, shall we say, misbehaving.

Earlier in the letter Paul had commented to the Corinthians about behaviors within that faith community that were contrary to the example of Jesus – a manner of living, mind you, which supposedly they wanted to emulate. In Chapter 3 Paul commented on their tendency to be jealous and quarrelsome. Elsewhere in the letter he pointed out their boastfulness, arrogance, their tendency to pursue their personal self-interest over the common good. He actually brought up instances of particularly shameful behaviors such as making fun of the poorer members in their church, or using the Lord's Supper as a time of gluttony rather than as an occasion to build true fellowship and spiritual unity.

In response to the reports he had heard about their un-Christlike behavior, Paul wrote this beautiful, beloved, inspiring passage about what love *should* look like in a community of faith. Showing great control over his own disappointment and anger, Paul described what their shared life as a church would be when they embraced love as their *modus operandi*, their way of being.

Who would have imagined that such unbecoming attitudes and actions were what was behind the familiar, beloved words of 1 Corinthians 13? Happily, I don't think that those unfortunate behaviors are at all characteristic of this congregation or of the vast majority of churches seeking to embody and demonstrate the way of Jesus to the world around us. And yet, Paul's message can still encourage and guide us, even though it was written to a different community and for a different purpose.

In the first section he reminded us that spiritual actions we might engage in are meaningless if not motivated by selfless, other-focused love. As examples Paul notes two activities that were favorites of the Corinthians – spirit-inspired eloquence and garnering public favor by acts of generosity. But to show them he's not picking on them Paul also mentioned a spiritual gift that was a favorite of *his* – speaking prophetically from special knowledge. He wrote that, without being inspired and motivated by sincere, committed, divinely-inspired love, eloquence is as meaningless as the bells and whistles common to the worship rituals of some of the pagan cults of the area. Without love as the motivation, having special insight offers no advantage. If approval or fame is the motivation rather than sincere love, even acts of generosity or sacrifice are shallow and not genuine.

The second section of this chapter described qualities of love. Paul helped clarify what love *is* by pointing out what it *isn't*: jealousy, conceit, pride, rudeness, selfishness, prickliness, score-keeping... or a quality that many of us were introduced to by the Broadway musical "Avenue Q" in the German term *schadenfreude* (delight at someone else's misfortune). In Paul's view, much of the behavior of the Corinthians tended to be the *antithesis* of divinely-inspired love.

At first it seems like the third section of the letter digresses from the praise of love. Paul wrote about childhood versus adulthood, about seeing a dim image in a mirror. But Paul was actually reinforcing his argument. He explained that just as adulthood *should* signal an end to childlike behaviors, spiritual maturity *should* put to rest the selfishness, disrespect, jealousy and other qualities characteristic of immaturity. Paul went on to say that at best our vision, our understanding of God’s loving-kindness is incomplete; we only incompletely perceive God’s nature, as if we were looking into a foggy mirror. The Corinthians’ ears would have perked up with that metaphor because “one of Corinth’s noted industries was the manufacturing of mirrors,” especially mirrors made of highly-polished bronze. Paul’s point was that while our vision, our knowledge of God’s love in this life is imperfect, “the time will come... when God will speak to us face to face.”² We will know God as clearly as God already knows us.

In Paul’s “love chapter” his argument comes down to this: the love we share with one another “is the foretaste of our ultimate union with God, graciously given to us now and shared with our brothers and sisters.”³ The divine love that awaits us in the Resurrection Life is given to us to practice with (so to speak) in this life – God invites us to practice divine love with one another. After all,

One cannot merely decide in a day’s time to start doing these things. They are learned patterns of behavior that must be cultivated over time in the context of a community that models and supports such behavior. We must learn patience; we must be taught how not to keep score of wrongs done against us.... The church should be a school for the cultivations of these habits and practices.⁴

We’re not changed by a miracle; we’re conditioned, we’re trained, we’re taught and we practice how to exhibit the qualities of love in our relationships with family and friends, our social circles and our church, our communities and the world community. God has given us love not only to guide many of us into marriage and family life, but to guide us in fashioning a community of mutuality. We might think of the church as Christ’s training ground; in the church we are taught and we practice what it is we want our lives to preach. Being part of Christ’s church guides us in learning to rise above mere self-interest and to value and embody patience, kindness, truthfulness, endurance, faithfulness, hope, or in a word, love.

[sermons: se20190203; © 2019 Jon M. Fancher]

² Hayes, 1997, 230

³ Hayes, 1997, 231

⁴ Hayes, 1997, 232