

“What Love Looks Like”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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From 1 Corinthians Chapter 13: 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; it keeps no record of wrongs; 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.... ¹³And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

I wonder if it's possible that some parts of the Bible may be *too* well known. The thirteenth chapter from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians – the so-called “Love” chapter – is an example: I wonder if it might have become too familiar. For brides and grooms it's a very popular selection, and it has appeared on so many church programs and greeting cards and posters. Because of its familiarity, its message about the nature of love borders on becoming trite, if not invisible.

Another problem with any discussion of love is that the word itself has been overused and misused. People use the word when they are really describing personal preferences (as in “I love Chevrolets” or “I love seafood”). People use the word “love” when they are describing infatuations like “puppy love” or idolizing a celebrity.

How can we recover the richness, the power, the stability of the biblical concept of love? What can a preacher do to overcome the over-familiarity of 1 Corinthians Chapter 13? An Episcopal priest in Michigan named John Albrecht had an idea. He stood up, walked to his pulpit to preach, paused, and said “Love!” He then sat down. The Guinness Book of World Records lists that as “the shortest sermon ever preached.” And as can be expected, some of Albrecht's parishioners said it was the best sermon he ever preached.²

Let's focus on the adjectives and nouns Paul used to describe Christ-like love – deep, compassionate, selfless love. Listen to a series of short stories and vignettes that describe what Christ-like love looks like and sounds like and feels like in real life.³ I begin with...

First: Love is Patient

- A Peanuts cartoon strip shows Lucy coming up to Charlie Brown and doing something that is very unusual for her. She says, “I love you.” But Charlie Brown keeps responding by saying, “No, you don't.” And each time Lucy answers a little louder, “Yes, I do, I really love you.” But Charlie Brown has been rejected so many times he keeps saying, “It can't be true.” So in the last panel, Lucy has reached the limit of her patience and she screams out in a loud voice, “Hey stupid, I love you!”
Love is patient.

¹ Based on my sermon “Can Anything More Be Said About Love?” from January 28, 2007

² Marc McCutcheon, The Compass in Your Nose and Other Astonishing Facts about Humans. Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1989, 53

³ All of these illustrations are taken from the illustration bank at Homiletics Online.com.

Second: Love is Kind

- Deborah was a kind-hearted, sincere woman, active in her church and her community. One day she boarded a commuter train to find her seatmate well into his own personal little "Happy Hour." He kept asking her, "Wouldn't you like a drink?" Each time Deborah tactfully declined. A few minutes before the last stop, the man spoke one more time: "I guess you think I am a no-good drunk." To which Deborah replied, "No, I think you are a very generous man."

Her response touched on his only visible virtue. But those words of sincerity started a transformation in his life. It is not until we love a person in all their ugliness that we can begin to transform them... or ourselves.

Third: Love is Truthful

- A TV reporter interviewed a mother who had single-handedly raised a large family. In spite of all the frustrations, disappointments and obstacles, she had persevered, and every one of her children had made remarkable achievements, not only in their schooling but also in their vocations. It was an inspiring story.

During the interview, the mother was asked her secret by the reporter who said, "I suppose you loved all your children equally, making sure that all got the same treatment?"

The mother replied, "I loved them. I loved them all, each one of them, but not equally. I loved the one the most that was down until he was up. I loved the one the most that was weak until she was strong. I loved the one the most that was hurt until he was healed. I loved the one the most that was lost until she was found."⁴

As that mother demonstrated, truthful loving requires us not to love others equally, but to love others by recognizing each one's unique circumstance.

Fourth: Love is Persistent

- In John Patrick's comedy "The Curious Savage" Mrs. Savage asks a character named Fairy May what's wrong.
 Fairy: Nothing. It's just that no one has said they loved me this lifelong day.
 Mrs. Savage: Why, yes they have, Fairy.
 Fairy: Oh, no they haven't. I've been waiting.
 Mrs. Savage: I heard Florence say it at the dinner table.
 Fairy: Did she?....
 Mrs. Savage: Florence said to you, "Don't eat too fast, Fairy."
 Fairy: Was that saying she loved me?
 Mrs. Savage: Of course. People say it when they say, "Take an umbrella, it's raining," or "Hurry back," or even "Watch out, you'll break your neck." There're

⁴ Donald J. Shelby, "The Lord's House and Ours," 10 May 1992, Santa Monica, California.

hundreds of ways of wording it; you just have to listen for it, my dear.

Fairy: (brightening) My dentist said I had perfect occlusion. Do you think he was telling me he loved me?

Mrs. Savage: What else?...

Fairy: Oh, thank you. I've been missing so much. Oh! My dentist loves me!⁵

Love is persistent, and we need to be sure that the ones we love know we love them.

Fifth: Love is Faithful

- When serving as pastor at New York City's Riverside Church, William Sloane Coffin told the story of an old man in India who sat down in the shade of an enormous banyan tree. Its roots stretched far into the swamp. "Presently he discerned a small commotion where the roots entered the water. Concentrating his attention, he saw that a scorpion had become helplessly entangled in the roots. Pulling himself to his feet, the old man made his way carefully along the tops of the roots until he came to the place where the scorpion was trapped. He reached down to extricate it. But each time he touched the scorpion, it would lash his hand with its tail, stinging him painfully. Finally his hand was so swollen he could no longer close his fingers, so he withdrew to the shade of the tree to wait for the swelling to go down. As he arrived at the trunk, he saw a young man standing above him on the road laughing at him.
- "You're a fool," said the young man, "wasting your time trying to help a scorpion that can only do you harm."
- The old man replied, "Simply because it is in the nature of the scorpion to sting, should I give up my nature, which is to save?"
- Faithful love is not turned away by the stings and pain of rejection.

Sixth: Love is Hopeful

- Before actor Jimmy Stewart left to fight overseas with his bomber squadron in World War II, his father slipped a note into his son's pocket. Jimmy's father ran a hardware store in Pennsylvania and was a staunch Presbyterian. The note read:
- "My dear Jim boy, Soon after you read this letter, you will be on your way to the worst sort of danger.... I am banking on the enclosed copy of the 91st Psalm. The thing that takes the place of fear and worry is the promise of these words.... I can say no more.... I love you more than I can tell you. Dad."⁶
- Remember the 91st Psalm? Here are a few of the promises to which Jimmy Stewart's father referred:

⁵ John Patrick, The Curious Savage. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1951, 36-37.

⁶ "The Boy Next Door," McCall's, January 1998, 38

*Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.
With long life I will satisfy them,
And show them my salvation.⁷*

7th: Love is Eternal

- The 1989 movie “Always,” directed by Steven Spielberg, was an inferior movie. But it had at least one good thing in it. The lead character died in a crash and returned as a ghost to tell the woman he loved, “I loved you. I should have said the words. I should have told you I love you, because I know now that the love we hold back is the only pain that follows us here.” Imagine if that were true, that “...the love we hold back is the only pain that follows us....” Just one more reason to embrace Christ-like love and share it, for God’s love is eternal.

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Let me share just one more story, a story that illustrates what St. Paul says love is *not*.

Love is unselfish

- A monk found a very precious gemstone. He put it in his knapsack and carried it with him. One day he met a traveler in need who asked the monk to share some of his provisions with him. The monk opened his knapsack and reached in to share his food when his fingers came upon the gem. So he lifted out the stone and gave it to the traveler. Overjoyed by his good fortune in the valuable stone, the traveler went on his way. A few days later, however, the traveler caught up with the monk. He begged him again: “Please, give me something more precious than this stone,” he said. “Please give me that which prompted you to give the stone to me.”⁸

Love is the currency we use in living a Christ-like life. Invite God’s Holy Spirit to lead you in experiencing how Christian love is patient, kind, truthful, persistent, faithful, hopeful, unselfish, and enduring.

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⁷ Psalm 91:14-16

⁸ As told by Donald T. Shelbv, Santa Monica, California, 2 August 1992; source unknown.