

I Corinthians 13
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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. 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.

I think I estimated once that I've done a little more than 300 weddings in the years that I've been an ordained minister. And I think at least half of those weddings I've read that passage from I Corinthians 13 about love. It's a great passage, isn't it? No wonder people want it read at their weddings. Love is patient and kind. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Great words for a wedding. If you are married, isn't that what you want? A love that can handle anything, a love that believes in one another, a love that last forever. Perfect for a marriage. But of course that passage has absolutely nothing at all to do with marriage. It doesn't even have anything to do with love between couples. It's all about how people should treat each other in church. Paul writes these words to a church that was having problems. The church in Corinth was one that Paul had founded and had close ties to. But after he left them they had a multitude of problems. There seems to have been a jockeying for power of rival groups in the church, a certain indifference to some pretty flagrant immorality, treating the poor in the congregation like second class members, and especially some people who believed that because they had particular "gifts" that they were more important than the

other members. You may remember from last week we read from chapter 12 about how we are all part of the body of Christ and no one more important than another. But in conclusion, Paul tells them that they should strive for the higher gifts—those gifts that build up a congregation. Then he tells them that he will show them a still more excellent way—that's when he speaks about love. It would be typical in Paul's time for this letter to be read to the Corinthian church when they gathered on a Sunday, so of course when the people heard Paul's words about love, they all said, “Ohhhh, how sweet,” and turned to their enemies and everyone embraced, right? Not right. Paul told them exactly what they didn't want to hear. Because he didn't speak about how we should feel toward each other, he spoke about how if we are going to be followers of Jesus Christ, how we must treat each other—imperfectly, yes, but this is our responsibility as disciples.. Not what they wanted to hear.

And it may not really be what couples looking to get married want to hear either, if they really think about it. Because this is not a passage about how wonderful the emotions of love are. It is a challenge to act with love in spite of one's feelings. Remember what the passage says, “Love is patient.” Are we always patient with those that we say we love? But that's what we are encouraged to do, to be patient, to be kind. To not be envious or arrogant or rude. To not insist on our own way, but to seek what is best for the one we love. To rejoice in the truth—even when it hurts. This isn't about flowers and valentines and sweet poetry. It's actually a description of how Jesus acted toward us, it is a description of how God acts toward his creation—patiently, kindly, seeking what is best for us at all times, even when the things we do must disappoint him, or anger him, or sadden him—he still believes in us, hopes for us, and will wait forever for us. It's not easy, the way of love is never easy—that's not only what we tell couples when they marry, but it is what we should tell people when they become part of the church. But so often we don't say that, because we tell people what they want to hear.

“It will be easy to be a member of the church, we don't ask too much from you. You just should show up to worship occasionally, maybe you might like to be on a committee or part of a group, but just one that fits your interests, nothing too challenging. And of course we hope you'll support the church

financially, but give what you can, certainly after you've paid all your other bills and taken care of yourself, whatever you think is comfortable.” That's what people want to hear. They don't want to hear that it might be difficult. That you might have to love someone that you don't like. That you might change old comfortable patterns and try something new. That you might have to learn to give up your anger or your grudge and start to forgive, maybe even forgive yourself. Because as we grow in Christ, which is our goal in the church, we discover which gifts are really the most important.

If I have a lot of money, so that I can live off the interest and never even touch the principal, and if I know how to trade stock and even have bitcoin in my portfolio, but have not love, I don't really amount to anything. And if I'm really famous, so that everyone watches my videos on Youtube and I've gotten to the point that I have to wear dark glasses and a hat so that I won't be recognized just to go shopping, but I don't have love, then all that doesn't really matter. And if my walls are covered with diplomas from all the best schools and everyone listens to what I say, and I'm so smart that I win a record number of games on Jeopardy, but I don't have love, then I don't really win anything.

That's not what we want to hear, it's not what the Corinthian church wanted to hear either.

The United Methodist bishop and author Wil Willimon tells the story about a group of seminarians who were engaged in a discussion of the student sermons in the preaching class. One of the members of the class had preached last Sunday in his church and had been saddened that a number of this parishoners expressed anger because of his sermon. One man had even walked out before the singing of the final hymn. Attempting to be helpful, members of the class jumped into a discussion of what the preacher had done wrong. Had he overstated his arguments in the sermon? Had he spent enough time developing personal relationships with his people? Had he spoken in too strong or harsh a tone of voice? The crusty old homiletics professor listened to the discussion and then finally said, “Did it ever occur to any of you that perhaps what he did wasn't wrong; it was right? I'm bothered by the assumption that many of you seem to have that there is some way to talk about Jesus without getting hurt for doing so. Let me assure you, none of you are smarter than Jesus. Jesus got into trouble for his preaching; so

will you!”¹

Paul offended people too. And as sweet as we think this passage is, maybe this is one of the ones that ticked people off. Because he tells them that they must love each other.

If love really rejoices in the truth, then it is the job of love to tell the truth—patiently, kindly, but the truth nonetheless, not just what we want to hear. And that's not my job either. In different committees of the church and at session meetings we have discussed what will attract more people to our church. In a way we are talking about “marketing” the church. We are trying to make the church more visible, trying to be out there in the community with our mission efforts, trying to be obvious about being welcoming to all people. All these are great things, but sometimes I get tempted to structure a sermon so that it will sound good, so that it will be accepted by everyone, to make you all feel good. And I think that most times you should leave here feeling good: you should always hear the good news of God's love for us, you should always have the experience of the love of God's people for each one of you. I hope that makes you feel good. But it is not my job to preach what you want to hear, it is my job to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that good news of Jesus comes with challenges—the challenge to be a faithful disciple, to be loving and forgiving even when we don't want to, to be caring for God's creation even when looking the other way would be easier, to care for the “least of these” because we see Jesus among the poor and the hungry and the sick and the imprisoned and the homeless. And we should be hearing the challenge to love—to love no matter what. No matter how we feel. No matter what the circumstances. To love no matter what, because that's the way God loves us.

1 Willimon, Will. “Pardon Me While I Offend You with My Sermon.”