

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Certain Bible passages are easily recognized by faithful worshipers as well as by people who seldom go to church. They include, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son” and “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.” These verses are popular because they provide comfort and hope. They remind us about the character and promises of God.

The reading we heard from 1 Corinthians is one of these beloved passages. It’s often read at weddings because it talks about love. But Paul didn’t write this memorable chapter to teach people how to treat their spouses. He wrote it to help us live as the Body of Christ.

Last week, we heard how the church in Corinth was divided by people’s preferences, prejudices and egos. The people in this struggling church argued over how to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, what kind of things to expect from their members, and how to conduct themselves in worship. They bickered over the role of spiritual gifts and were divided by their allegiance to various pastors. Paul sent this letter to plead with them to resolve their differences and be united in Agape Love.

Agape Love is deeper than mere friendship. It’s also different than romantic love. Agape Love is the highest form of love mentioned in the Bible. It is empathetic and unconditional. It always puts other people’s needs above your own. It’s the kind of the love Jesus was referring to when he told us to love our neighbor as our self.

Paul's letter to this first-century church contains a powerful message for twenty-first century congregations. Our conflicts may not be as intense as the ones that separated our ancient siblings, but as many of us know, even minor disagreements can divide a congregation into camps. Paul's timeless words remind us to view everything we do...and everyone we do them...with through the eyes of Agape love.

This passage shows us that everything we do must be governed by love...or it doesn't mean anything at all. For example, if I preach a really good sermon but don't have love...I'm just sounding my own horn. Or if I donate the things I don't need to the Once Again Shoppe or share something that is precious to me with someone who needs it more, but don't have love...I am nothing. Or if I spend hours writing notes of encouragement to every member of this congregation but don't have love for the people who receive them...my words are empty and, as *The Message* describes it...nothing but the "creaking of a rusty old gate."

According to Paul, Agape love is the foundation for everything we do...everything we are...and everything we hold on to. It's the guide that shows us if something is worth dealing with...worth doing...or worth spending time with. When we practice this kind of love, we become a source of love to the people who receive it. And isn't that what the church is called to do? Be conduits of God's unconditional love to the people we encounter both inside and outside of our fellowship.

In her book, *All About Love: New Visions*, Bell Hook describes love as, "the will to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth." This definition both reflects

Jesus' command and describes the mission of the church. It reminds us that we're called to foster the wellbeing of all of people by embodying the love we experience in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

For the past four weeks, we've heard of how Jesus' earliest followers embodied his sacrificial love. Peter and John restored a crippled man's dignity when they healed his legs and embraced him as their peer. The church in Thessalonica inspired an entire region by living out their faith in joy in spite of severe persecution. We also discovered how easy it is for the Body of Christ to become disjointed when the Church in Corinth focused on personal preferences and egotistic expectations.

God knows that in our own strength, we are incapable of selflessly loving other people...that apart from Him, we are selfish, prideful, and inconsistent. But we belong to a resurrection God who is able to make a remarkable transformation in the lives of individuals and congregations. When we allow the Holy Spirit to change us for the better...to let God satisfy us and heal our wounds...we will receive a flood of genuine love for others that casts out fear, selfishness, and pride in light of God's glorious grace.

I wonder...how does Agape love influence the way we care for the least, the lost and the lonely? Are we dedicated to being the church we love...or are we devoted to being a source of love for everyone we meet? As we discover what it means to be the Body of Christ in a world affected by the Coronavirus, how does love shape the way we view our budget? Our committees? The use of our building? The way we practice worship?

Listen to how Presbyterian pastor, Katy Stenta rewrote Paul's famous chapter to illustrate what Agape love looks like in this challenging and unsettling time.

If I speak with all the authority and power in the world, but have not love, my voice becomes blurred and untrustworthy.

If I can move mountains, changing laws, changing history, changing minds, and have not love-my work becomes meaningless.

If I proclaim victory: that we are "great" the "best" the "most" and talk about all I have done for my family and my country, but have not love, I in actuality, have gained absolutely nothing.

Love does it's best to wait till after the danger of disease has passed to hug a loved one.

Love does not compare leaders, all of whom are doing the best they can to keep people safe.

It does not gut Medicare and ignore the vulnerable and the elderly in nursing homes as it boasts that it is doing everything possible to save lives.

It is not racist or bigoted. It is not ignorant or panic inducing.

Love is not irritable or resentful-it wears a mask out of love, and pays the essential workers more, and understands how reliant we are on one another for survival.

Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, it does not ignore the racial discrepancies in illness, treatment or quarantine enforcement.

Love rejoices in the truth, even when it is hard.

For it is through love we bear all things in sickness and death, it believes all things even in joblessness and loneliness, hopes all things: even as singing is silenced the hope for the opportunity to sing again persists.

Love endures all things.

Even when we can't believe it-especially when we can't believe it. Love endures all things.

Love never ends: as for prophecies: promises of the future beauty and success: it comes to an end.

Tongues: chattering gossip and lies...they too will cease.

Even knowledge: will come to an end as humans are limited and to think we know more than a grain of how the world works is hubris.

For we only know bits: facts and science serve as only the beginning, and we can foresee some other bits: arts and gospel serve to extend our knowledge beyond our sphere and experience.

But, when the complete comes, the partial will end. God will give all knowledge to everybody. And it is up to us if we experience knowledge as judgment or grace.

For I am but a child of God, speaking and reasoning like a child: babbling the bits of love I understand to God and other humans.

When I am fully mature: when I join God, I will put away childish ways: jealousies, regrets, conspiracies, imposter syndromes, competitions and internalized bigotries and self-hate will fade into the foolishness they are.

Now, I can barely glimpse God and love: sometimes I feel it when I briefly glimpse myself in the mirror and can actually affirm, for a moment, that I am God's beloved.

Someday I will know fully, just as I am already fully known by God.

Someday I will fully know myself, and I will be fully known by others, and acknowledged as belonging-not a piece of me, but all of me, as a created piece of God's love.

And as Faith, Hope and Love abides today.

Someday there will be no need for faith and hope.

So fully will we be bathed and punctuated by Love.

May the Spirit continue to grow us in deeper love for God and one another, and empower us to love all people with kindness and compassion, so they can experience God's Agape love through us. Amen.