

February 2nd, 2025

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 “This Love That I’ve Found”

I’m taking a break from Luke this week because the lectionary wanted me to split the reading from Luke 4 that we had last week into two parts. I couldn’t do it because I wanted you all to experience the whiplash of Jesus going back to his hometown synagogue to read scripture and having his folks get so enraged with what he said that they wanted to throw him off a cliff. That doesn’t mean I’m going to ignore this week’s lectionary text. Remember, I have two other passages to choose from. This week’s epistle reading is from Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, otherwise known as First Corinthians. Not “one” Corinthians. It’s known as the “love chapter.” Folks recognize this as, “the scripture that gets read at weddings.” The one that ends with, “the greatest of these is love.” And yes, I read it at my oldest son’s wedding two years ago and it was read during our wedding 37 years ago. When removed from its context, it’s a lovely, sentimental passage, but when you know what’s going on in the rest of the letter, you realize that Paul wasn’t thinking, “This might be a good thing to read at a wedding some day!”

Let’s talk about the Apostle Paul for a moment. Twenty-five percent of the New Testament was written by either Paul, or someone writing under the name of Paul. That’s something I learned in seminary by the way and I’m passing it on to you because I know your faith doesn’t depend on who wrote Colossians or 2 Thessalonians. Anyway, Paul, under the name of Saul of Tarsus, used to persecute Christians on behalf of the corrupt religious and political leaders of the day. On his way to persecute Christians in Damascus, he was struck blind and had a face-to-face encounter with the Risen Christ. This caused him to have a change of heart, so then he went by Paul and became a leader in the early church. He was given the same authority as the apostles who followed Jesus during his earthly ministry which is the main reason why his writings were canonized as scripture. Paul helped Christianity expand north from Palestine all the way up into Northern Greece and Turkey. The gospels

are the story of Jesus, but Paul's letters are the story of Christ's church discovering what it means to follow Jesus and to carry out his mission in the world. Some of the letters Paul wrote to the early churches were encouraging "keep up the good work" letters, while others were, "you need to get your act together" letters.

First Corinthians is the latter. These people were deeply divided on a multitude of issues. These folks were a hot mess. They couldn't agree on cultural issues. They couldn't agree on theological issues. They couldn't agree on even the most basic moral codes. They had no idea how govern themselves. They couldn't agree on the nature of Christ. They couldn't get their heads wrapped around the work of the Holy Spirit or the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In fact, spiritual gifts is the main issue that Paul is addressing here in chapter 13. If you read chapter 12, you learn that they were arguing over which gifts were the most important. Some said prophecy is the most important. Others said speaking in tongues is the best. No, healing! No, teaching! No, wisdom! No, discernment! Everyone was trying to one-up each other and jockey for positions of power in the church based on these gifts. So Paul had to teach them a lesson about spiritual gifts and what role they played in the Chapter 12 ends with, "And I will show you a still more excellent way." That "more excellent way" is what chapter 13 is about, not "how to have a long and lasting marriage." Although, to be fair, I still think it's a good scripture to read at weddings.

Paul acknowledges that all Christians are graced with spiritual gifts and they all matter. They don't tell you anything important about the person. It's the same as saying you can't tell anything about the merits of a person by adding up the value of the Christmas presents they receive. Gifts are gifts. They don't make you who you are. But love is different. To be a person who loves is *not a gift* that can be given to you. It's something that is cultivated and grown in you. Love comes from the core of your being, and the extent of your love reveals who you really are. God is love. In the Bible, "love" is the most significant one-word summary of the nature of God you can find. That means that in order to

be more like God, which is what we aspire to do, love needs to be our defining characteristic. Receiving the gift of tongues or prophesy or teaching does *not* make you more like God. It is love that reveals what is God-like in *you*. Which means spiritual gifts are secondary to love. Yeah, but spiritual gifts are good things, right? They help us do the things we're called to do. They help us accomplish the mission and ministry of the church, right? For sure.

But ... let's say that someone is a talented speaker or writer or preacher or poet – someone whose words move and inspire people and are quoted or even awarded. According to Paul, if that person does not have love, they're just a noisy gong or a clashing cymbal. All that person's words count for nothing, even if that person is put on a pedestal. Love is what counts most. To love God and to love others; to love even those who set themselves up as our enemies is what counts. Yeah, but that doesn't make sense. If you're getting things done and if you're getting recognized for your good work, doesn't that count for something? Up to a point, yeah. But the point that Paul is trying to make is that it doesn't amount to a hill of beans unless you're motivated by love.

In the church, if someone has prophetic gifts and can see into the heart of matters so they can offer a critique of how the values of our society need to be in better alignment with God, but doesn't have love, it's all pointless. Even if that critique inspires a grassroots movement of change that begins to turn things around for the better? Not unless it's inspired and motivated by love. If we're just in it for the social capital and pats on the back, then no. If we're only motivated because it's fun or we get accolades from the people who look like us and think like us, then all of our accomplishments amount to nothing. If the preacher is hailed as the greatest prophet of our generation and gets put on the A-list speaking circuit and gets invited to all the top-rated news shows to provide commentary, the only thing that matters as far as God is concerned is that we are motivated by love.

Okay, okay fine. But what about in my own personal life? What if I cultivate an impressive range of socially conscious virtues? What if I keep a grey water bucket in my shower and wear an “End Poverty Now” bracelet? What if I give half of my income to worthy causes? What if I serve meals at the homeless shelter every week and only eat organically grown food? Even if we do all these things consistently for years, if we don’t simultaneously grow in our ability to generously love even those who do none of these things and even those who think we’re wrong and *shouldn’t* do these things; if we become more and more pure but not more and more loving, then we have remained part of the problem and contributed almost nothing to the solution.

This must have been a tough situation for Paul. According to Acts chapter 18, he founded this church. He was invested in these people and their spiritual growth. He loved these people. But he also had to tell them some uncomfortable truths, especially when they went off the rails, which is why he wrote this letter in the first place. Even though there’s a huge cultural gap between first century middle eastern culture and twenty-first century North American culture, I try to imagine what it would be like if Paul was working with a 21st Century North American church today. I can imagine him preaching this chapter word for word to his people one Sunday morning. Inevitably someone would say, “Hey, that would be a great thing to say at a wedding!” Paul would have to say, “Okay, I’ll give you that, but this is about the attitude you have when it comes to using your spiritual gifts to accomplish the work of the church. Maybe after this sermon, someone would pull Paul off to the side and say, “Okay, so if I am faithfully at church every week, even when it means missing a ball game, and I set up the chairs, and make soup, and weed the garden, and attend a home group, and pray the daily prayers, and help out at the workshops, and volunteer for absolutely everything ... if I become resentful of those who don’t pull their weight, instead of growing in my capacity to love them and delight in serving them even when they take advantage of me, then you’re saying all my diligence is wasted and I’ve missed the point?” I wonder if Paul would say, “Yes.

You *have* missed the ‘still more excellent way.’ You *have* invested in that which will only pass away and not in that which is forever.”

Love is the only thing that really matters. Love is not in a hurry. Love wants what is best for the “other” person. Love does not begrudge them their successes or feel good about being “better” than them. Love is not pushy or demanding or belittling. Love is willing to step aside and let others do it in the way they do it best, not what you think is best. Love is not always getting its nose out of joint or becoming bitter over the attention shown to others. Love hangs in there through thick and thin. Love is always ready to give people the benefit of the doubt and take a chance on them. Love keeps believing that the best is yet to come. Love cannot be snuffed out, no matter what you hit it with.

God is love, and in the end, only love matters. Now we know very little, but when we come to know ourselves as fully known, as known by God, known in the depths of our being, then we will know ourselves known by love, we will know ourselves loved, we will know love. Then we will love in all its fullness. And guess what? Love never ends. It never fails. All these other things will pass away. But love is what we have come to know in Christ Jesus; love is what we have been shown of God. God is love, and those who belong to God are transformed in the image of that love. And nothing else matters. Everything else will fall away, and love alone remains.