

1 Corinthians 13
The Love Chapter
August 30, 2020
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

If you worshiped with us last week, you know we are ending the summer with a couple of my favorite passages from the Bible. Last week, I shared my reflections on Psalm 23, hopefully reminding us that in the midst of all of the world's chaos, we are not alone. This week our focus is 1 Corinthians 13, known as "The Love Chapter." Like Psalm 23, this text is sort of like a well-worn sweater, it's familiar and comfortable. And really, who doesn't need a little more love?

This is 1 Corinthians 13:

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.

***SLIDE**

Every time I read these words, the memories of the day John and I were married come flooding back. I would guess maybe a few of you experience that when you hear these words as well. Before we go any farther, I should tell you I held myself back from making this sermon a slideshow of my wedding. You're welcome. As I

mentioned last week, this passage is probably read at 75% of the weddings I officiate. When it is, I take that opportunity to remind the couple this text describes the ideal. I tell them there will probably be a whole lot of days in their lives together when the ideal seems out of reach and the love holding their relationship together doesn't seem much like what I just read. Because we are not always patient or kind. Often, we are envious, boastful, arrogant and rude. Hopefully, these words serve as a bit of an invisible string that pulls us back when we stray too far from this ideal.

Despite the fact that most of us are familiar with this text because we have heard it at numerous weddings, it isn't about the love between two people making a lifetime commitment to each other. 1 Corinthians is a letter, written by Paul, to the church in Corinth, which he started. Imagine starting a church and then finding out later the church was struggling. Today, we might Zoom in for a consultation. 2000 years ago, when something important needed to be said, they wrote a letter. The church in Corinth was at odds with itself. Paul wrote this letter to address conflict within the church.

Chapter 12, gives us a picture of what is going on in the church. The good church people, as good church people do, had been arguing amongst themselves about which spiritual gifts were the most important and therefore, which people were the most important. Because, you know, that's a great use of time.

So, from a distance, Paul tried to straighten them out, to remind them what was really important and it was not to prove themselves more essential than everyone else. As is the case for every group of people everywhere, they all brought their own unique ways of serving and connecting with God. Instead of appreciating all of the gifts they brought, encouraging everyone to use their gifts for the good of the church and the world, they argued about whose were the best. The people who spoke in tongues thought they were the best. The preachers thought they were. The ones who gave a lot of money thought they were the most valuable. And on and on. Soon, they were spending more time arguing than they were doing ministry.

In his letter to them, Paul tried to redirect them (much like parents of toddlers do every single day!) from self-centeredness to other-centeredness. He underlined the importance of unity and equity among the people in the church. And then,

here in chapter 13, Paul put a finer point on what he was saying by telling them that none of their gifts were much good if they weren't practiced in love. A person could be the very best at whatever, but if they don't do it out of love, it is, in Paul's words, "nothing."

***SLIDE**

And then, just in case there was any confusion about exactly what love looks like, Paul spelled it out. The kind of love he wrote about wasn't a mushy emotion that is here today and gone tomorrow, like pumpkin spice lattes. "Love," Paul says, "...never ends." We tend to make love about feelings and how we feel in the moment, but real love isn't about emotions or meeting our own needs. It is not consumable, something we grab for ourselves. Love is something we do. Real love is about the value we place on human beings and about how we behave toward each other based on that. The kind of love Paul is talking about is not affected by how we feel or the actions or words of other people. This love, like God's love, is unconditional because it is rooted in the inherent worth of all human beings. And truthfully, despite what all the sappy love songs say, love is hard work...all the time, and without it, no matter how hard we work, we really are "noisy gongs and clanging cymbals."

A long time ago, I learned about "people first" language. Contrary to the popular saying, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," words can hurt. How we say things matters a great deal. "People first" language prioritizes people. It's like this, instead of saying, "I met a homeless person," "people first" language encourages us to say, "I met a person who is experiencing homelessness." Or instead of saying, "Poor people must have access to healthcare," say, "People who experiencing poverty must have access to healthcare." The person is always a person first. Every descriptor is secondary to our identity as human beings.

The reason I mention this today is that in this text, Paul calls us to prioritize people with our actions in the same way "people first" language encourages us to prioritize people with our words. We are supposed to love first because without love, nothing else matters and long after everything else is gone, love remains. It is love that changes the world and it is love that changes people, including ourselves. When we love others well, we are changed. In his book *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Thomas Merton wrote, "Love demands a complete inner

transformation – for without this we cannot possibly identify ourselves with our brother. We have to become, in some sense, the person we love. And this involves a kind of death of our own being, our own self.” I think he is saying what Paul is saying, loving moves us from self-centeredness to other-centeredness if we will let it.

I want to end this morning with a gentle reminder about love. As Christians, we make a pretty big deal about love. We say God loves everybody. And we say we love everybody. I mean, today we read a whole chapter about love. But sometimes we forget that, because we make such a big deal about love and talk about it all the time, people pay attention to what we say and do in order to learn more about this love and this God we say loves everyone. We have all heard stories, maybe lived them ourselves, of how Christians and churches say they love everyone, but their actions don’t seem to match their words.

As we wrap up summer and head into what promises to be a bit of a stressful fall because, well...2020 and COVID, let us re-commit ourselves to being a community of people who love first. And let the ones who observe our social media conversations, read our emails, teach our children, bag our groceries, serve our meals, live in our homes, and share our office space, see a reflection of God’s love that even Paul would recognize. In other words, may they know we are Christians, not by what we say, but what we do. May they know we are Christians by our love. Amen.