

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Love

Love is....

How would you fill in the blank?

Love is...

Verses four through the first part of verse eight in 1 Corinthians 13 is probably one of the best known passages in the Bible. Even people who have no idea what is in the Bible have likely heard this passage in the wedding scene of a movie or read it on some wall hanging. It seems such a beautiful sentiment. Little do people realize it that it came straight from a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the fledging group of Christians in Corinth who were in turmoil.

In Paul's time, Corinth was a bustling city of about 600,000 people plus transients. It was strategically built at meeting place for shipping lanes running east and west. The modern-day city of Corinth is about 78 km west of Athens, with the ancient city only about three km from there. Not only was the city a busy and happening place of commerce but the Isthmian games were held near the city, second only in popularity to the Olympics. There was also this wonderful mountain that afforded a great view, but its popularity came from the fact that on its summit lay a famous temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, in which one could avail themselves of the numerous sacred prostitutes at the temple.

This is just a little background about a city in which Paul had come and established a church somewhere in the vicinity of 53-56 AD. The people to whom he brought the message of hope and saving grace of Jesus Christ came from various cultural and economic backgrounds. And just as the city itself was one of competition, after Paul's departure the community of faith struggled to live out their calling as Christians. They had become competitive about who had the most important gifts, who and what should be considered more valuable. They began to believe that those who could speak in tongues were somehow filled more with the Holy Spirit than others who were gifted with the less showy gifts like steadfast faith or wisdom.

This was a church that was fighting and Paul's letter to the Corinthians was a response to a letter he received reporting the trouble. Throughout the letter Paul uses sarcasm and a stern but loving voice in an attempt to set the people back on the path to a place of faith, hope, and love.

One must remember that Paul did not place section headings in his own letter. Headings and chapters indications were added by translators to help divide the Bible and make it easier to access. So when we read about this love chapter, for Paul it came right on the heels of the what he wrote just previously about the gifts given to individuals for the common good of all those in the faith community or church.

The description of what love is and is not was directly tied to how the church was to understand their bonds. It still applies. This passage about love, the greater way, the more excellent way, the way beyond measuring, was written to a community that was bickering and struggling, even bringing lawsuits against one another. They can't seem to get past the divisions even though they are all baptized with one baptism with water and the Holy Spirit, and are one in the faith.

This struggle was and is not unique to the church in Corinth. Though our divisions in this church and anywhere else may take on different forms we are all baptized into one Holy catholic (small c) church. It is our unity in our baptism, with the diversity of gifts that each is given, that equips us for the work God is calling the church to with each other and in the world.

In this chapter Paul starts out with talking about different gifts but ends up saying that it doesn't matter what your gift is, without love your gifts are of little use. Our gifts are given in love and are to be used with love.

Today we tend to throw the word *love* out there pretty easily. We *love* our spouses and our children and grandchildren, but we also *love* chocolate or baking, the colour on the wall, a dress. We *love* favorite shows online line or on tv. We *love* sports. We do a lot of "loving" but that is certainly not the kind of love Paul is writing about to the Corinthians.

This love is rooted in God. It comes out of God's love for us and we respond to that love with more love for God and others. This is active love, and in English we miss that every "love is" or "love is not" line is followed by what should be understood as an action. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

In a community of faith, or in life in general, it is not about comparing ourselves to others to see who has more...more power or prestige, more clout, more gifts physical, intellectual, or spiritual, more attention. We need to move way past all of that stuff. Love looks at how we can use all that we have been given in order to bring healing to a broken world, knowing that we are all broken in some way or another. None of us get everything right every day.

Love lifts up, love forgives, love listens, love takes time for another knowing that each of us needs this at times. In the church we should be able to have love for others in their

times of challenge, distress, and struggle, as well as our own. That is when we know we are the church.

Coming up on our annual meeting next week, it does not matter what budgets we set, what goals we might want to achieve, in worship or our work. It does not matter what activities we pursue be it greeting, singing in the choir, belonging to a women's group, our tea and bazaar or flea market and bake sale, without love these are just activities. With love they become outreach and hope, they take on a new purpose and meaning. As a Professor of the New Testament Brian Peterson writes, "love is a busy, active thing that never ceases to work. It is always finding ways to express itself for the good of others."¹

To help us here these words even more clearly in contemporary English, here paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, written by a Bishop of the Apostolic church in the US, J. Mark Jordan.

Although I may be a gifted speaker and can pray in tongues anytime, anywhere, and yet I don't love others, I am only making noise without substance. And though I seem to have an answer for everything and people come to me for my opinions, and I am a dynamo of spiritual power with many spiritual victories, and yet I have no love, I am a zero. And though my generosity is well known, and I have sacrificed all for God with wounds and scars to prove it, yet I have no love, God hasn't profited from me at all.

So, how can you tell whether or not you have real love?

See for yourself how love behaves by the following list:

Love smiles through the pain of being hurt, criticized, misunderstood and ignored without constantly complaining.

Love never confronts anyone unless it is with a kind, well-considered word without blasting them out of the room.

Love doesn't judge or want what others have—clothes, car, job, wife, husband, money, personality or even spiritual gifts. It doesn't go around talking about God being unfair or people being uncaring when the real problem is envy and jealousy. It shuns the limelight and recognition. It doesn't have "I" problems.

Love declines to make a scene about everything and won't make mountains out of molehills. It will not choose inappropriate and disruptive ways to make a point. It doesn't have to be right all the time and it is slow to get stirred up about every tale spread through the ever-active grapevine. Love doesn't wear its feelings on its sleeves, and it

¹ Peterson, Brian. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2734. Accessed February 1, 2019

doesn't assume that others are thinking, doing and intending the worst. It gives people the benefit of the doubt.

Love suffers when someone fails or when tragedy strikes. It takes no pleasure in sin or wrongdoing of any kind. It is most interested in the truth winning out, even when the truth hurts. Love lends its shoulder to bear the burdens of others and never breaks their confidence. It believes the best in people and tries hard to trust them. Even when love feels someone is wrong, lying, or making a huge mistake, it still hopes for the best possible outcome. And when love is disappointed and crushed by bearing, believing and hoping, it endures the hurt and embarrassment with cheer and restraint, always continuing to be itself—love.

Three great forces motivate the church: faith, hope and love. These powerful attributes are the basis for everything the church is doing in the world today. But even when you narrow it all down to these three, at the top of the list you'll find love.²

Love is not bliss, it is hard work and takes effort. Faith, hope, and love summarize the life and work of the church. Faith and hope will find fulfillment one day when we see God face to face. Love though, love never ends, in fact we likely know even greater love when we see God face to face. It is the excellent way each day, everyday, and always. Amen.

²Jordan, J. Mark. Posted on **Thinking in Color**. <http://jonathanjordan.squarespace.com/> , Accessed February 1, 2019.