

1 Corinthians 13

And the Greatest of These is Love

There they stand, the couple, so in love, ready to take on the world. They look stunning as all eyes are on them. The wedding service is about to begin. As the minister moves into the liturgy the reading is the ever familiar and beautiful words of 1 Corinthians 13 the Love Chapter as it is known. The words seem so fitting for such a time as this. One feels as if soft music should be playing in the background.

But hold on! Remember that screech sound that was made when the needle of a record player skittered across the record, almost like a zip sound or the rewind of the cassette player. Kids hear it, but have no idea where that sound originated, but those of us from the era of record and cassette players recognize the sound instantly.

Well, that would be the sound that might happen if the Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter to the Corinthians, heard what we have done to that passage. He would hit rewind and let us know what we had missed. Rather than being a passage that comes out of a beautiful love story, this passage was written to a community that was in conflict. Paul had been rebuking the community for its lack of care for one another and their oneness when it comes to bragging rights for who has the best and most important spiritual gifts. This was a fledgling Christian community that was not on the right track and Paul was going to let them know in no uncertain terms that their infighting and treatment of each other was not going to cut it.

Rather than a tone of beauty, I suspect Paul is using a much more challenging tone of voice. He wanted their attention and he wanted them to hear how far off the mark they were. So the line he uses and we read at the end of chapter 12 is, "I will show you a still more excellent way. And that is when the writing on how to love starts.

These people needed to know what Christian love really looks like and means. So Paul talks about the things, the gifts, that the Corinthians have been coveting. Gifts of the Spirit, that when understood correctly, are given in different measure to different people so that all gifts together can be used by the church to bring about a transformed experience of the world for ourselves and others. A world where respect, dignity, and the value of each individual is upheld.

Paul says to them, "¹If 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."

He goes on to talk about love and the qualities of love and what love is not. As I read, note in the way Paul writes how love becomes an act of the will, it is a choice. Remember, he was writing to people who were in conflict with one another. This is not a romance.

Love is patient...
Love is kind...
Love is not envious...
Love is not boastful...
Love is not arrogant...
Love is not rude...
Love does not insist on its own way...
Love is not irritable...
Love is not resentful...
Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing...
Love rejoices in the truth...
Love bears all things...
Love believes all things...
Love hopes all things...
Love endures all things.

Now a caveat before we continue...this is not a love that means that you need to be a doormat for someone else. As much as this passage has been used for weddings it has also been used to bully people into staying in an abusive relationship and that just is not covered in this kind of love. God desires that all have abundant life, and anything that goes against that needs to be challenged. If the truth is that someone is abusive then you need to find your way to wholeness.

What Paul was challenging was oppressive and arrogant behavior, people thinking that they were better than others because they felt God had given them a more important and better gift of the spirit than another. Thing is, each of us is given gifts for the good of the whole community, especially the community of faith. Not everyone gets every gift. When taken together the gifts empower the whole of us, allowing us to do the work of church as the hands and feet of God for one another and in community. That of the church and beyond these walls to transform and bring abundant life to others.

The words we so often use at St. Andrew's of *Responding, Restoring, and Rejoicing* are about using our gifts as a community of people with various talents, abilities, and resources to impact lives so that all may live wholly and abundantly.

Paul continues to share that the only thing that never ends is love. All other gifts have an expiration date that comes in our lifetime or with our death. He writes...

⁸ Love 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 [when we are together with God] we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

Paul then shares that there are three gifts that are available to everyone... faith, hope, and love. Everyone has access to these gifts. All of us can have faith, all can have hope, all can love. These gifts bring about the opposite of what was happening in Corinth. These are gifts that unify the community as followers of Jesus.

On Wednesday we have an interesting occurrence where Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday both land on February 14th. It is a day that will meld the romantic love of Valentine's Day with the sacrificial love of Christ that displayed the deep love of God for all humanity on a cross.

We can celebrate both. It is important to celebrate the deep love that we have for each other, it is also important to give thanks and reflect deeply on the great love of God in Christ that has given us the ability to have a relationship with God in beautiful and intimate ways while sharing that love with one another. A love that is rich and meaningful.

Paul concludes this portion of his letter with words that need to settle within us as individuals and as we seek to be the church in our own time, "And now faith hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." May those gifts of the Spirit be within each one of us.

In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.