

God's love makes us the church

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey
at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, February 3, 2019
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (year C), 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
(Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30)

1 Corinthians 13:1-13(NRSV) *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. And 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. If 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.*

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. 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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When 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. For 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

This coming Saturday, we will gather together for the annual Red & White Dinner. This dinner celebrates God's blessings given through the youth ministry of this church—ministry to and with young people. We're selling tickets and holding a raffle and silent auction, to raise money to make special youth trips more affordable for participants. This is also a great opportunity for a dinner out, especially in advance of Valentine's Day.

The stores started decorating for Valentine's Day right after Christmas. All the talk about love in the commercial world in February is a great excuse for Youth Ministry to focus on relationships in their Sunday morning programs. I find it interesting that today's reading from First Corinthians 13 appears in the lectionary near Valentine's Day. 1 Corinthians 13 is a favorite passage about love, and often used at Weddings.

Paul writes "love is patient, love is kind...[love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things...And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." Cue the red hearts and the romantic music!

While this passage certainly informs marriage and romantic relationships, those relationships are not Paul's focus here. Paul writes about marriage in chapter seven and elsewhere. Paul uses similar concepts there: Paul describes an overarching framework of mutual commitment and mutual submission to each other and mutual support. However, chapter 13 is not part of that discussion about marriage. In fact, the discussion of marriage in chapter seven is part of Paul's larger message in First Corinthians that gains focus in chapter 12. Paul is primarily interested in the unity of the church, the unity of the body of Christ.

That's right: First Corinthians 13 is not so much about marriage as it is about us—about the church! First Corinthians 13 is about God's love for us and how God's love makes us the church.

In the last two weeks, we heard from chapter 12, and Elisa and I preached on those readings. Paul addresses divisions in the church in Corinth. Some divisions came from factions built

around leaders. Other divisions arose because people claimed that their own spiritual gifts were better than the spiritual gifts of others. Some said speaking in tongues was the most important. Some said gifts of prophecy or knowledge were most important. Others said gifts of miracles were most important. All this boasting was dividing the church.

So Paul describes how all these gifts come from the same source: all from the Holy Spirit. And God gives these various gifts to all of us so that we might build up each other. Paul describes the church as one body—the body of Christ, with each person like a different body part that cannot survive without the rest of the body. Paul’s strategy is not to put down the various gifts, not to put down speaking in the tongues of men or angels, for instance. Paul lifts up these gifts as valuable—if they are used to build up the whole body of Christ.

Then, at the end of chapter 12, at the end of Paul’s description of the one body and of all these wonderful, valuable gifts of the Holy Spirit, Paul writes “Now I will show you a still more excellent way!”

“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. And 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. If 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.” Do you see the parallels? Each example comes from the gifts Paul describes in chapter 12. Tongues, prophecy, knowledge, miracles. As valuable as each of these gifts may be, there is a more excellent way! Without love, any and all of these gifts are nothing!

Love empowers and directs each of these gifts. Paul even writes that these spiritual gifts so important to the Corinthians will all pass away—but love will not pass away. Faith, Hope and Love, these three will abide, and the greatest of these is love. God’s love is the start and the destination for all the gifts God gives us. God’s love makes us the body of Christ. God’s love makes us the church.

Think about the systems that operate without that kind of love. There are groups and organizations that have plenty of skills, plenty of resources, and yet they are completely overcome with dysfunction. Leaders in Washington demonstrated this in spectacular fashion this past month, stuck in so much self-interest, even when the issue was simply word choice or bragging rights. We see the same thing in a local context as well. Neighborhoods can become so protective of their own self-interest that they isolate themselves from the next town over or refuse to cooperate about public services.

It is easy to think of “those other people” as the ones with all the dysfunction, but each of us participates in these systems. Churches all the way back to Corinth have these troubles all the time. We also see this in Family systems as well. Families and extended families become so entrenched in hurt and bitterness that they have a hard time giving love and receiving love. In the end, when each of us worships our own personal self-interest above everything else, that self-interest eats us up inside. You see, the world does not revolve around us, and we will never adapt to life if we expect the world to always give us what we want.

However, God's love is different from the dysfunction of the world. And God can heal that dysfunction with his love. God's love is not about a contract for self-interest. God's love is not about sentimentality and warm feelings. God's love is about self-giving and self-sacrifice and new life and reconciliation where relationships function and flourish! God so loved us that he gave himself for us in Jesus. God loved us even when we opposed him. Jesus loved Judas even when he knew he would betray him. Jesus loved Peter even when Peter denied him. Jesus loves you and me even though we turn away from him, just like Peter.

God's love is not just a love that get's along or placates. God's love also calls us to the truth and seeks the best for each of us. Paul writes, love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. God loves us enough to challenge us to a better way. Look at Jeremiah's call that we heard in the Old Testament reading. God sends Jeremiah to call the king and people to turn back to God and away from idols and away from forgetting God. And even while God calls for Justice, God still loves us, and is willing to come for us and die for us that we might be reconciled again.

This is the love that makes us the church—not sentimentality and just getting along, but rather God's self-giving love. God gives us this love and calls us to love in return—to love God, and to love each other with that same kind of self-giving. This is the love that makes us the church. This is the vision that God has for us—a Christian Community, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Notice how the rest of our vision statement carries out this love: we start with worship of God, so that our love has the right starting place. Then we are active in discipleship, so that we learn that love together. Then we serve Christ in the world, moving from this Christian Community to share that love with others and to invite them in.

Notice that this is what is happening in today's Gospel reading as well. Jesus has just told the Synagogue in Nazareth that he is the Messiah who will bring about the Lord's favor. At first they are all excited, but that excitement has to do with their own self-interest. When Jesus shows from scripture how God showed his favor to those beyond Israel and Judah—those in Sidon or Syria, for instance, then the crowd becomes enraged at him. Jesus doesn't want us to hoard God's favor, but to extend that grace and mercy to others so that they might know God's love as well. Jesus loves us and challenges us to a love not just from our own self-interest, but to a self-giving love that comes from God, and calls us all back to God.

God gives us his self-giving love, and calls us to share that love with each other, and with the world. God, in his love, transforms communities to places of reconciliation and new life, places that flourish. We can even carry that love into our governments as well. And come to think of it, isn't God's self-giving love the kind of love that helps marriages and families flourish too?

God's love makes us the church.
God's love heals the world.