

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Taking Love Seriously”

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I Corinthians 13:1-13

The Gift of Love

1 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. *2* 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. *3* 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.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

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. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

There is a wonderful, romantic story of a young man who was very much in love with a woman who was much taller than he was. Each night he would walk her home from their work place and each night he longed to kiss her, but was too shy to ask. One night, in the middle of their walk, he finally summoned up the courage. “Will you let me kiss you?” he asked. She was agreeable. But the young man was so short in stature that his face could not reach her lips. He looked around for something to stand upon and finally found a large cement block on the side of the road, a block that was just the height he needed. After they had walked on for a half mile or so more, the young man suddenly felt very brave. He asked his companion for another kiss. “No,” said the woman. “I’ve already given you one kiss. That’s enough for tonight.” The young man was crushed. “Then why didn’t you stop me from carrying this darn brick for the last half mile?” The moral to the story is “love always bears a burden.”

I don’t remember much I learned in high school but I recall from my Senior English class that the Inuit people of northern Canada have at least 24 different words

to describe snow. Each word defines the concept of snow in some particular way. There is a word for snow before a storm, one for snow after a storm, one for snow lying in a certain direction, and another for snow at a certain time of year. Many words are needed for snow because snow is such a large part of the world of the Inuit people.

Despite the weather this time of year, on Valentine's Day, our focus is not so much on snow as it is on another word that is a big part of our world. Our focus is on that slippery word, "love." Our English language and our culture have put an almost impossible burden on that one word-love. We can mean so many things when we use it. We can mean obsession, desire, addiction, lust, or affection. The Greeks were a little wiser than we are. They had at least three words to identify love. One word meant friendship. Another spoke to a deeper and more physical desire. And the third word described a quality of love that continues to give even when no love is returned.

The apostle Paul writes, "Three things abound; hope, faith, and love, and the greatest of these is love." These words come from one of the most familiar sections in all of Scripture. At this point I have to throw Deb Ahrens under the bus. When she told me that she was offering some special music for this service, she asked what my sermon topic would be. She, I think, was hoping for some kind of integration of music and word. I told her my topic was going to be love. She said, "I hope you're not using the love chapter from First Corinthians!" Sorry Deb! But you are right. We hear it so much it has lost its meaning. In his commentary on this piece of Scripture, William Willimon writes "that the best thing about this chapter is that we know it and love it. The worst thing about it is that we know it and love it."

Chances are that if you were married in a religious service, someone might have read these very same words at your wedding. But as lovely as these words are for Christian weddings, Paul did not write them to address any type of romantic love. Paul would probably be shocked if he knew we would read those particular words at weddings. So even though it is Valentine's Day, we must try our best to remove the text from that kind of romantic setting today. Biblical scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier writes that these particular words are "closer to hard eyed realism than simpering sentimentality." No, Paul wasn't writing about the magic and mystery of romance. He was writing about the power of agape, that third kind of love the Greeks recognized as the love that gives on behalf of another.

Paul's audience, the church at Corinth, was a deeply divided congregation. Each person in that church was parading their spirituality, boasting about their own contributions to the church, comparing their own efforts favorably to the others with whom they shared a pew. Some of them claimed to be experts at speaking in tongues. Some bragged that they were the best teachers. Still others touted that they were the greatest interpreters of Scripture. Many of them were literally at each other's throats in a nasty church fight. But Paul believed that the biggest problem of the church was not selfishness or pride. His writing seemed to reflect that the Corinthians' main concern was not even lack of money or apathy or attendance. He wrote that the biggest problem was a scarcity of love.

With that background, let those familiar words roll over your minds again. Paul said that no matter how faithful or spiritual or knowledgeable, or charitable one is- if there is no love in action, each effort amounts to nothing. Paul said that love is patient and kind; even toward people who are just plain wrong. Paul said that love was not

boastful, arrogant, or rude; not even when it seems as if people just need to be put in their place. Paul said that love was not irritable and does not insist on its own way. One parent I know has commented, "Whoever wrote this does not live with a teenager." Paul said that love is not resentful; even when everyone at church seems to take us for granted. And finally Paul writes that love does not rejoice in wrongdoing even when we might delight in saying, "I told you so!" Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

It is interesting to note that of all the kinds of love that the Bible speaks about, the one that Paul focuses upon is the kind of love among human beings. Paul doesn't speak about loving God. He doesn't write about passion, affection, or adoration. He speaks instead about a unifying love that brings people together. He writes of the kind of love that makes a Christian community, the kind that builds a church.

Paul says that we are bound to each other in love. Our well being as a community is bound to the well being of one another. I owe this kind of love to you- not because I like you, although I might. I owe this kind of love to you, not because you have been kind to me, although that may be. I owe you this kind of love because we are one in Christ.

The love of which Paul speaks is not a personal, private thing. It is not love that makes us feel safe and cherished and warm. This is not love, the commodity as it is sold by Hallmark, jewelry stores and flower shops. This is love the action, love the response, love the witness, love the sacrifice, and love the offering. Because we are not very good at this kind of love, we need to hear these words often. Love is the obligation that makes us a Christian community.

Recent research indicates that, in part at least, what we call "falling in love" can be attributed to the presence in the body of a drug called phenylethylamine, a form of natural amphetamine. The problem is, as research also suggests, is that we build up a tolerance for this chemical in about two or three years. Love at first sight is then long gone. Love the responsibility and commitment has to take over. Thus runs the wisdom of the couple who were celebrating their fortieth anniversary with a quiet dinner for two. The wife picked up her champagne glass and offered this toast, "In spite of everything." I don't know if St. Valentine would have approved. But I think St. Paul would have. After forty years, after trials and mistakes, after irritation and nasty habits, after failures to act and failures to remember, the presence of love is indeed a miracle. Love bears all things.

Paul tells the Christian community at Corinth that they will succeed at being a church that witnesses to the love of God when they feel bound to one another with responsibility and commitment, undergirded with patience and kindness. Paul not only exalts the concept of love among all other virtues, he makes it the condition of all the rest. This is the kind of love that takes work. This kind of love takes a commitment to the long haul. This kind of love is our Christian responsibility. This kind of love is how God first loves us.