

A Different Kind of Love  
1 Corinthians 12:31b – 13:13

January 31, 2016

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday After the Epiphany

Although we disagree about many things, few would disagree about the importance of love. Authors have written of love in many romantic novels. Poets have praised love in numerous poems. Musicians have composed countless songs about love. The Beatles sang, “All you need is love.” Problems, difficulties, and divisions occur among people when love is not present. People all agree that love is a good and necessary thing in life. What people disagree about is the definition of love.

Many people today define love as simply a feeling – a good and pleasant feeling – but a feeling nevertheless. Love is often a shallow feeling. I can say, “I love pepperoni pizza” or “I love when the Chicago Cubs win like they did this past year” and I haven’t said anything too profound.

Despite what love purports to be (all about another person), it is often a self-directed, even a “selfish”, feeling. One author put it this way, “The love romanticized and glorified by modern culture is self-seeking. It is rooted in the self and its needs and emotions.” (Lockwood, p.456) In other words, we mostly love those who provide something we want or need – emotional support, financial care, sexual fulfillment, and so on – in return. Simply put, we love those who love us and can do something for us.

Love in today’s world is a fragile feeling that often doesn’t last long. People can fall in love, fall out of love, and fall right back in love in a very short time. The huge number of divorces, many after only a few short years of marriage, indicates that what our society calls love is not a very sturdy or lasting thing.

So, what *is* love? The Greek language has four different words for love: love between friends, love between parents and children, love between sexual partners and the one used in our text today, *agape*. *Agape* is a type of love that is unselfish and self-sacrificing. It is directed solely toward others without asking or expecting anything in return. It is the love God has for us and the love which we are to have for one another.

Do we actually have that kind of love for each other? In theory, we would say we did. But the Bible doesn't deal in theories about how things *should* be but how they actually *are*. Our text for today fleshes out love in theory by showing how love actually works in reality. Paul writes,

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Does that describe you? How often are we short tempered instead of long suffering or unkind instead of kind? Who doesn't envy or boast in some way? Arrogance and rudeness are considered to be matter-of-fact behavior, even among Christians at times. Within our families we often insist on our own way and are irritable and resentful toward one another (keep a record of wrongs, as previous translations have it). We may enjoy doing wrong rather than rejoicing in the truth. Can we honestly say we bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things when it comes to our relationships with others?

Yet Jesus says to us, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love (have *agape*) one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." (John 13:34) We haven't come close. We may show these characteristics from time to time. However, when Jesus gives us a command, He requires complete compliance and not just our best effort. And He requires perpetual, not occasional, obedience. A good confession might be to read this text in a negated form with "I" substituted for love.

I am not patient or kind; I envy and boast; I am arrogant and rude. I insist on my own way; I am irritable and resentful; I rejoice at wrongdoing, but do not rejoice with the truth. I do not bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, or endure all things.

Can we get by without love as long as we do the right thing? The people in Corinth thought they were very spiritual people who did very spiritual things with very great spiritual gifts (as we heard in the epistle reading last week) and thought they were just fine. Yet they lacked love. They were divided into factions, tolerated gross sin, hauling one another off to court, ignoring the poor and weak in faith, and many other things.

We can fall into the same trap. As long as we are present for the worship service and do all the right spiritual things, we may think that it doesn't matter what our attitude toward each other is. If we are very spiritual, then does love become optional? Not at all, Paul says. The greatest spirituality without love means nothing. Paul says that if we preach the Word of God with the eloquence of angels, but have no love, then we are like noisy gongs or clanging symbols. If we know the Bible from cover to cover, can explain its greatest mysteries, and have the strongest of faiths to move mountains, but do not love, we are nothing. If we are so charitable that we give away everything we have, even ourselves, but have no love, we gain nothing.

Love is not optional. Love is required of us. Our best efforts fail us though. At best, we get caught up in culture's weak self-centered love. At worst, our sinful human nature compels us to serve and live only for ourselves. Either way, it appears that we have no hope of experiencing true love or living in true love.

Who could possibly love in that way? As I said before, this *agape* love is the love God has for us. But it's much more than that. God not only loves in this way (as if it is a feeling God can choose to have or not have toward us), but God *embodies* love to the point that Scripture says, "God *is* love." (1 John 4:8, 16). Since God is love, as the Scripture says, we can substitute God for love in our text and get a clear idea of God's attitude toward us.

God is patient and kind; God does not envy or boast; God is not arrogant or rude. God does not insist on His own way; God is not irritable or resentful; God does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

God is patient and kind toward us in our sinful rebellion against Him and our lack of love toward each other. He does not react negatively toward us as we might act toward someone who acted in like manor toward us. He is not envious or boastful, arrogant or rude, irritable or resentful. Although He invites us into relationship with Him, He does not insist on His own way and force us to do anything.

Nor does God then rejoice in wrongdoing. In other words, He does not look at our sin gleefully as an opportunity to zap us for doing wrong. This is how some people perceive God to be, especially

when their lives are going badly. The God who personifies love rejoices in the truth of His Word that He “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Tim. 2:4) While His holiness does not permit Him to simply overlook sin or refuse to punish sin as it deserved, His great love caused Him to find a way to deal with sin and save us from the punishment we deserved.

To do that, God would not only have to be love and personify love, He would have to be love in action and become a person like us. That’s the miracle of Christmas which we celebrated a little over a month ago. There was a hymn in the previous blue hymnal called, *Love Came Down at Christmas*, where one line said, “Love was born at Christmas”. This is unique and accurate description of what happened. Not only did God the Son become a human being, born as a baby in Bethlehem, but, since God is love, love itself was incarnate in that baby boy, Jesus.

The Son of God, a flesh and blood human being, could love to the extent that He would bear all things. He not only bore our human nature, but He bore all our trespasses, transgressions, iniquities, rebellion, and sin in His body because He loved us so much. Out of love, He endured all for us – all the punishment for us and in our place: not only the whipping and beating; not only the crucifixion; and not only physical death. He endured separation from His Father – hell itself – for us and in our place.

Out of love, God raised His Son, Jesus, from the dead. Out of that same love, He has forgiven you all your sins; rescued you from death and hell; and given you eternal life in heaven by His side. In your baptism, God has joined you to Christ and to His love. He has invited you to experience His love. He has called you to live in His love and to demonstrate His love in your dealings with all people.

Given the Biblical understanding of love, living in this kind of love and demonstrating this kind of love may seem to be a daunting task. Our natural reaction would be for us to try harder to love and become frustrated when we fail. But this kind of love is not something we can produce on our own through our best efforts. The love God is and has can only be received as a gift and given as a gift.

Therefore, be immersed in His love by receiving it where God has promised to give it. By reading and hearing His Word, you not only learn more about God's love for you, but you are experiencing that love and receiving that love. Even better is the Lord's Supper which the early church called "the agape meal." They viewed the sacrament as an opportunity to be strengthened in God's love for them and to show God's love to one another. As we kneel at the communion rail, we, too, receive God's love in the body and blood of Jesus by which we are forgiven of all our sins and, at the same time, share in that love with one another.

The love of God flows to us in His Word and Sacrament. The love of God then flows through us, not just in words, but in acts of loving service to others. The more we make use of the means of grace – the Word of God and the Sacraments - the more we have the love of God. The more we have the love of God, the more we are able to love others in thought, word, and deed. The more we love others in thought, word, and deed, the more we are able to reflect the love described in our text for today.

We will be more patient and kind; we will not envy or boast; we will not be arrogant or rude. We will not insist on its own way; we will not be irritable or resentful; we will not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoice with the truth. We will bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.

This is truly a different kind of love from the love authors write about, poets rhapsodize about, and musicians sing about. This is true love. This is the love of God for us in forgiveness, life and salvation; in us for everyday life; and through us to our neighbor. God grant that we receive His love, enjoy His love, and show His love to others. Amen.