

If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all God's mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump" and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love. Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always "me first," doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when other grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end. Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. But when the truth arrives, our incompletes will be cancelled. When I was at infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up I left those infant ways for good. We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing God directly just as God knows us! But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.

Today with the scripture reading and the celebration of people who were married more than 50 years ago we are focused on love. This scripture from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth is most often heard at and is associated with weddings... but Paul wasn't an advocate of marriage. In an earlier letter to the Corinthians he wrote, "It is good for them [speaking about the unmarried and widows] to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion." So Paul wasn't writing about married love in this letter. He was writing to the church who was arguing about which committee should not have its budget cut. He was writing to the church locked in a battle about which position on the sanctity of marriage was biblical. He was writing to the church who was tired of their pastor yammering on about the importance of being in a spiritual growth group. He was writing to the church who shied away from change. Paul wrote this letter to the church in conflict, the church in disagreement, the church struggling to find its identity as genuine followers of Jesus Christ. He wrote this letter to us.

I do use this scripture in wedding ceremonies especially if the bride and groom have told me "we're spiritual but not religious." I'm a Christian minister, and I'm religious, and how I order my world, (and the word "religious" comes from the root word "measure") and how I measure the world, is by my knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ. So I need to talk at a wedding about how to measure love, from God's perspective. I realize however that without knowing (that is, having intimate knowledge)

of the love Jesus has for us, and the power the Holy Spirit gives us to love... Paul's letter is just pretty words. And in the excitement on a wedding day pretty words are good enough. But as time goes on we learn that we need more love than we ourselves can manufacture... for our spouse, for our children, for neighbors, even for ourselves. How we access more love is by opening ourselves to God's love. We love (Paul wrote these words too) because God has first loved us. So when we open ourselves to be loved by God, God and love make a home in us. Slowly, imperceptibly slow, that love takes over and changes us. We flourish as human beings when we learn to love as Jesus loves... as Jesus expressed His love from the cross.

Let's read verses 4-7 together from the bulletin, just that paragraph that starts at the top of page 3. "Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always 'me first,' doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when other grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end." (If I'd been Paul's scribe I'd have left out the words, "love puts up with anything" because those words have been used against women and minority peoples to keep them in their place. Fortunately Paul also wrote that love flowers when the truth is told.)

Last week I spoke about the plumb line of our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. The lesson we heard was from Luke's gospel, when Jesus declared His calling, His ministry, as He read Isaiah's prophecy. "God's Spirit is on Me; God's chosen Me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free." Last Sunday I said that Jesus' calling is our calling; the plumb line of our own ministry.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians is another plumb line for the church as a body and as individuals: this is how we are to love. We are called to be agents of love in the world, not seeking our own advantage, but working on behalf of others. And this is where we learn to love, if we're open and willing to learn. The church can be a training ground, a boot camp, where we can practice, and give, and receive godly love. A place to fail and be forgiven and begin again... to love with the love God continually holds out for us.

I'm reading a book called *Never Call Them Jerks* and it's about learning to see people as fellow children of God, and rather than identify someone as a difficult person... identify a difficult behavior or a difficult relationship. A church is a family and like all families there is conflict and multiple opportunities for misunderstanding here. In my family of origin it was my role to figure out how people were feeling in order to know how to act... I was the helper, the family barometer. I don't need to do that anymore. It's exhausting and inaccurate and yet I still find myself trying to second-guess how someone else (that I think may not like me or approve of me) feels about me. This can lead me to be defensive and angry... and then it's hard for me to see that person as a fellow child of God. It's hard for me to let Christ's love flow into me and through me. Defensiveness, anger, fear... all of them make it hard to let Christ's love heal the broken parts of me. But I want love. I want to practice and pursue love. I want it to be said of me that Jesus is seen in me. I have a long way to go to love like Jesus loves me... but

the alternative is unappealing... the alternative leads me farther away from Jesus instead of closer to Him, which is where I want to be. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear."

The love that Paul wrote about is the love Jesus expressed throughout His life, and in His death on a cross, and in His resurrection... Jesus was a living testimony that nothing can separate us from God's love. God's love can flow into us, and through us, and into our relationships with all the world. Through the Holy Spirit Jesus is loving us still, guiding and correcting us, forgiving us, and using us. He calls us together as His body (and He uses any means to bring us together: committee meetings, Choir, volunteering, serving, study and prayer groups, friendships, worship... however and wherever He can get us together) Christ uses that time to fill us with His love. We have to be aware, and present to His love. It doesn't come to us by magic, it comes to us by mindfulness and openness and gratitude. And when we are soaked in Christ's love we're able to respond to the needs of this thirsty world for God's abundant, merciful, joyful, unconditional love. I believe that practicing and pursuing love for each other (not simply friendship but the love Paul writes to us about) is what can transform a congregation... into the Body of Christ.

So Paul wasn't writing about marriage when he wrote to the Corinthians about love. Why hear this scripture today when we celebrate long-lasting marriage? Well, ideally in a marriage partners help and encourage each other to practice love as God loves. Ideally in marriage we are encouraged to be our "best self." All of us need a partner, a soul-friend, to help us love others in the ways Jesus loves us. It's too hard to do alone. With only our good intentions to love... these powerful words from Paul, this transformational gospel lesson, can be like the pretty words from a wedding ceremony... that fade like flowers in a bridal bouquet.

We all need a partner, a spiritual friend, to walk with us as we walk with Jesus; to pray with us, and speak the truth in love to us, to help us love with 1Corinthians 13 love. In the 12-step tradition that person is called a sponsor. A sponsor provides 1-on-1 encouragement, guidance, honest feedback, and they have first-hand experience with the disease of addiction. I wish this was something the church practiced and endorsed: that everyone on the Christian journey must have a sponsor... someone to encourage, guide, listen, and who has first-hand experience with the disease. Our common human disease is sin. Before we get mired in the definition of sin let's shorten it to this: sin is all the ways we deny love; the love of God, the love of others, and the love of self.

The purpose of Paul's letter about love to the Corinthians was to remind and reinforce the lesson that when we love each other with Christ's love, His love is in us! (If you look at the front of the bulletin under the picture of the cross and flame you'll see our mission statement. Our mission is to experience and express Christ's love. Our mission is 1Corinthians 13!)

The love of Christ we experience is the love of Christ we express. Paul knew something about karma: that when we give love we get love. Jesus also understood karma. Karma is a Buddhist doctrine of consequence, which loosely interpreted means "what goes around comes around." Jesus taught this when He said. "In everything treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

To love with the love Jesus modeled, and Paul wrote about, we need support and community. It isn't possible to do on our own without a partner, a soul-friend, a sponsor, to help us practice and pursue godly love. There is someone here today who would be a good partner to help you (as Paul wrote to churches growing in godly love and striving to be the Body of Christ) to "Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly." In our coming time of silence I hope you'll prayerfully consider who you'll ask to partner with you to help you experience and express 1Corinthians 13 love.