

Love is an Action, Not Just a Feeling

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13 John 13:31-35
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Some of you may be familiar with the 1965 hit song, written by Burt Bacharach and Hal David, and sung by Jackie DeShannon.

*What the world needs now is love, sweet love.
It's the only thing that there's just too little of.
What the world needs now is love, sweet love,
No, not just for some but for everyone.*

This morning we are going to reflect upon the reality that love is indeed for everyone, and not just for some. And as we look at the scripture passages from 1 Corinthians and the Gospel of John, we will see how that especially applies to all the other folks in the congregation.

Before he became President of the United States in 1912, devout Presbyterian, Woodrow Wilson, served as President of Princeton University. In a commencement speech he gave in 1907 he stated, "You must act in your friend's interest... the object of love is to serve, not to win." I like that quote because it reflects a very biblical understanding of love: **love is more of a verb than a noun; more of an action than a feeling.**

Of all the biblical references to love, perhaps the most familiar passage is the one we just heard from 1 Corinthians 13, written by the Apostle Paul. In what is often referred to as 'the love chapter,' the nature of love is described, in part:

*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.
Love bears all things, believes all things,
hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends.*

People who never read the Bible or even attend church are most likely familiar with these words, for they are spoken at almost every wedding, marriage ceremony, or service of commitment. Because of that, most people believe that these lofty and poetic words about the nature of love refer to the love between two people in a committed relationship.

The Greek word (the written language of the New Testament) for this kind of love is eros, that romantic, passionate, erotic love between two people. But was that what the Apostle Paul was addressing when he wrote this passage? Was he writing about two people in love when he wrote "Love never ends"?

In order to find out, we must look at what comes before and what comes after these verses in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. The primary reason Paul wrote this letter in the

first place was to deal with the growing number of conflicts within that Corinthian congregation. There were cliques and factions, all claiming that they had possession of the real truth, that they alone were right. They were a decidedly diverse group of people. They spanned the spectrum of social class and even race.

Paul wrote this letter in response to a letter he had received from them, asking him to resolve some of their differences. Part of Paul's response was to remind them that every member of the congregation was blessed with different gifts, talents, abilities, and resources for ministry. **Every member of the congregation, therefore, deserves to be treated with equal respect.** It's the classic case of seeking unity in the midst of diversity – certainly a goal and ideal of this congregation.

Paul's point is simple to understand, but not always easy to put into practice. In order for the church, any church, including this one, to function properly, each and every person has been given and blessed by God with a different gift, talent, and ability to *share* with the community of faith. No gift is better or worse than another. **And it's only when everybody contributes that the church is being the place God intends.** In other words, find what you are good at, what you enjoy doing, then put it to use here in the church for the common good of all.

In the 12th chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul provides a specific, yet partial, list of gifts that persons are blessed with. **Paul then challenges the congregation to put all these things into a particular perspective, and that perspective is love.** This is what leads us into Chapter 13.

Unfortunately, this is when the English language is insufficient. For in Greek, as many of you know, there is not one, but three words for love. **Eros**, like mentioned earlier, is that passionate, erotic love between two people. **Phileo**, from which comes the town name of Philadelphia, "the city of brotherly love," is that good old slap-on-the-back, friendship/affectionate kind of love. And then there's **the word that Paul uses in the famous love passage from chapter 13. It is agape, not eros, that Paul is referring to.**

Agape is the kind of self-giving, sacrificial love that is deeply concerned for the well-being of another, whether that person be a spouse or partner, family member, friend, or complete stranger. Paul uses this word, *agape*, to describe the kind of love not in the context of a marriage relationship, but the kind of love needed in the church, the love between each member of the congregation. *Agape* is the love that builds up the congregation as the body of Christ.

Love, as Paul understands it, translates into a way of life that does not insist on its own way, is not egocentric but self-giving. This was the love that Jesus expressed. **This is the love that is the expected norm for Christian behavior.** It is what Jesus said would differentiate us, as followers of Christ, from others. Love, then, is not simply an abstraction or an ideal. Love is to be concrete, practical and applied to our daily. And in this particular biblical context, that especially applies to our congregational life.

In this manner, then, love is indeed more of an action than it is a feeling. **Love is a matter of Christian ethics – of how we treat one another. Within a congregation, love expresses itself in ordinary, down-to-earth situations. It demonstrates patience, refuses to stoop to petty retaliation, shuns competitiveness, resists keeping score, remains hopeful, keeps us humble, and is inclusive of everybody.**

United Church of Christ pastor, Steven Davis, eloquently states it this way, "Love is not an independent, individual act, but a shared covenant, a rhythm of giving and receiving. It is the element and epoxy that defines the community of Jesus' followers and binds them to one another."

With all this in mind, we can now have a better understanding of Jesus' words as recorded in John 13: 34-35. In the context of the Last Supper, John writes that Jesus said:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

I learned something very important this week when studying this passage. Biblical scholars believe that the phrase "one another," is meant to refer in a limiting way to other believers, to brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore, **the command to "love one another," in this context, isn't referring to "all people," but rather specifically other members of the community of faith.**

Jesus has been with his disciples long enough to know there's nothing easy about the kind of love he is prescribing for them, and for us. But in loving others in this manner something remarkable happens – **we become new persons.** We become shaped more and more in the image of God in which we were created. Through our acts of kindness, caring and compassion, through our humble service to each other, through our ability to genuinely listen to one another in an effort to get to know each other better as persons, we become shaped more and more in the image of God in which we were created. We become more and more identified with Christ, who embodies love for us and the world.

Love for one another, and not just for some, must be the defining characteristic of any community of faith, our community of faith. For ultimately, our love for one another is much more important than any particular theological position to which we claim, and we know how important that is to most of us.

Ignoring this new commandment is not an option for followers of Christ. For as Paul warns at the very beginning of his exposition on the nature of love in 1 Corinthians 13: 1-3, "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... 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."

And in good Calvinistic understanding, let me state that **it is by the grace of God and the presence of God's spirit within us that enables us to exhibit this kind of love for one another.** And I can think of no better words to express all this than those found in the old hymn, "And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love." May that be said of us!

Amen.