

January 28, 2007  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13 *Agape at Agape*

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
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1If I speak in the tongues<sup>[a]</sup> of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames,<sup>[b]</sup> but have not love, I gain nothing.

4Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. 11When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. 12Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

13And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

I wasn't with you for worship last week, but I did read Corey's sermon. As he offered a challenging sermon that critiqued the apathy and complicity of many Christians in this country, I began to get fired up. I found myself responding to his sermon like a crazed sports fan—he'd offer a critique of the far religious right, I'd cheer like the horses had just left the gate. He'd throw a zinger at the self-righteous fundamentalist and I'd want to jump up and down as if my guy had just entered the end zone. He'd offer a "shame on you" to institutionalized religion, and I'd get as eager as a Texas cheerleader's mom. And then, the piece de la resistance, the big climax, the final lap—his remembering my lone stand against a bloated landscaping project at the church I served in Rhode Island—a landscaping project designed to make the front entrance of the building look "more welcoming" when indeed said front entrance wasn't accessible to those in wheel chairs or with mobility issues. And the truth of the matter was that if the church would spend just a quarter of the \$20,000 they planned to spend on bushes they could have made the entrance fully accessible, but still they all voted to spend the entire amount on those stupid bushes. But after the glow of Corey's affirmation wore off, I began to feel sad as I wondered what happened to that Robin—the Robin who could stand up in front of a powerful church governing group and say enough is enough and be the only one in the room to vote no. And right there and then I made my resolve, no more namby-pamby, warm and fuzzy, I'm here to affirm you every week. Oh, *contraire* my friends, Robin's got a brand new bag! But then I looked at the lectionary passage I'd chosen for this week—1 Corinthians 13:1-13—the love passage—where's the hellfire and brimstone in that?

And so instead of that on-fire, in-your-face, she-is-to-be-feared Robin, you're getting more of the same from me today . . . we'll try for hellfire and brimstone some other time. Because what could be sweeter, and less confrontational, and more comforting than a sermon on love. After all, love is patient, love is kind, love does not envy . . . wait, it's such a special passage that I remember it from a song I learned in Sunday School—there's nothing that says warm and fuzzy like a Sunday School song.

Love is patient, love is kind, love does not envy.

Love does not boast, it's not proud, love's not rude or self-seeking . .

Ah, yes love. It's a many splendored thing, and as we approach Valentine's Day, we're reminded of it everywhere we look—in store windows, grocery store aisles, newspaper ads, and television commercials. And when we see those heart shaped candy boxes, those fuzzy-wuzzy teddy bears, those sparkling heart pendants—don't we all just think . . . Well, I don't know what you think but, truth be told, I think it's all a bit overwhelming. Don't get me wrong, I'm just as thrilled as the next gal when those little candy conversation hearts hit the store shelves at this time of year, but that's just because I like candy, they've got nothing to do with love.

And, when you think about it, do many of the things we claim about love really reflect the Apostle Paul's words on the subject? Obviously Hallmark's marketing, Zale's greed, and Russell Stover's profit margins are not just disturbing to us but it can be said that they are antithetical to Paul's teaching. After all, where's the love in thousands of innocent Africans, many of them children, forced into slavery in diamond mines so that merchants can offer deep discount diamonds that are, according to their slogan, "forever", while a child slave working in the diamond mine from which said "forever" diamond came may not, because of beatings, malnutrition, and hazardous working conditions, live to see her 14<sup>th</sup> birthday. And where's the love in mushy cards and syrupy chocolates exchanged between a husband and wife once a year when words of love and acts of sweetness for each other aren't even offered once a day. Where's the kindness in that, where's the perseverance in that? When we begin to buy into these commercial images of love instead of actually practicing the art of loving, who are we protecting? In what are we putting our trust?

Perhaps a sermon on love isn't as warm and fuzzy as we might expect it to be. When we really think about love, it's a whole lot more difficult than we ever imagined. We've grown to equate the word love, at least in the watered down way we use it in our society, with favor or preference more than with real life true love. After all, can you really "love" your new car? No, of course not. You can enjoy driving it and think you look sassy in it, but that's not love. Can you really "love" your job? No, you can find great fulfillment in it and look forward to but that's still not love, at least not in the way Paul describes it. Paul's description of love limits it to something that occurs within the container of a relationship, it is intense and interdependent, but only as it is shared with other people.

Paul planted a church in Corinth. First Corinthians, the book of the Bible we read from tonight, is Paul's response to some of the problems that arose in that church after he left. The thirteenth chapter of the letter is couched between two chapters which reveal that there was a good deal of tension and conflict in the Corinthian Church. Members of that community had been fighting over which spiritual gifts were more valuable and fighting over who was allowed to say and do what in worship. Paul explains that all spiritual gifts are equally necessary and no one has the upper in hand worship. And then, he really socks it to 'em with this love chapter. Immediately before his eloquent description of love, Paul reminds the members of the church in Corinth, and he reminds us, that all of the spiritual gifts in the world—all of the musical talent, or money know how, or skill in caring for others, or willingness to teach, or ability to preach—all of it is nothing unless it is done in love. And Paul stresses that in order for these things to be done in love, we must first have the freedom to love.

Now freedom gets a lot of play time in our society and we have come to understand it in political and nationalistic terms. However, when Paul talks about freedom, he is talking about the freedom we have in Christ—the freedom Christ gives us to love. This is a hard concept for us to understand—of course we're free to love, we're Americans—the land of the free, home of the brave and all that. But that's missing his point. Paul understands that in order for us to be free to love—we must be free not just from the oppression of others, but from ourselves and our own hang ups. For the people of Corinth, that meant freeing themselves from their incessant need to try to figure out who's got the better spiritual gifts and who or who is not allowed to do what in worship. For us, the freedom to love means ridding ourselves of the things that hold us back and limit us.

For instance, there are a lot of great things to say about my mom. She's a talented pianist. She's a conscientious paralegal. She raised two children who aren't a drain on society. She's an exceptional grandmother. She's a loving and supportive wife. However, she is not tall. She's not even of average height. She is, in a word, short. Now, some of you are short, too. And there's nothing wrong with being short. However, it seems to bother my mom that she is short. It has also bothered her, and nearly consumed her, for as long as I can remember, that she is not skinny. When we were kids she went from diet to diet—she'd lose weight, gain weight, lose weight, gain weight . . . I think it's fair to say that she does not have a particularly healthy body image. And her negative body image is a real hang-up for her, I know it limits her and oppresses her. I know that there are things she would do if she weighed thirty pounds less that she doesn't feel comfortable doing now. However, I don't think her weight bothers anyone else. I know it doesn't bother Nathan. Because just last week, when Mom was sitting at her vanity table drying her hair in shorts and a t-shirt, Nathan—who is madly in love with his nanny—came up to her, touched her thigh, and said, “Nanny, pwetty wegs.”

When Nathan looks at his Nanny's leg, he doesn't see the things she sees--cellulite, stretch marks, varicose veins, or razor stubble. When Nathan looks at his Nanny he sees patience, kindness, and generosity. His innocent acceptance of her leads me to wonder, what would her life be like if she were as free from her hang ups about herself as Nathan is. As a commentator on this passage writes, Christ's love sets us free from ourselves and makes us become able to love. (129, Beardslee, Interpretation Series Commentary on First Corinthians)

That, my friends, is agape love—it is the willingness to be free from our own desires and wants so that the needs of others might be met through our loving acts of kindness and compassion. And I guess that's not a message that's all that comforting or warm and fuzzy. It is a different way of thinking, a different way of living, and a different kind of challenge for us all. But, it is not, according to Paul, an option. It is no less than what we've been put on God's Good Earth to do. And so, God willing, let's embrace the challenge, live our calling, and truly love our neighbor as ourselves. Thanks be to God for the gift of love and the opportunity we have to receive it and share it with others.