

Jeremiah 1:4-10

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

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The Greatest Gift

First Corinthians 13. I believe I have mentioned before that I am pretty much a lectionary preacher. That is, I preach from the texts that are suggested for each given Sunday. Irene and I both do this. I have always liked to see how the Spirit moves through me, and you, each Sunday as we meditate, reflect, ponder together on texts that many Christians around the world are considering on that same Sunday. My organized self likes the structure and the flow of the lectionary too.

This week however, this, my last week of getting to preach and lead worship up here as your interim pastor, I just was not feeling anything from the texts for the day.

It was this passage, I Corinthians 13, that came to my heart as I thought about our time together. This is the Apostle Paul's word on love. You might think this an unusual choice, given the rocky times we have shared as a faith community these past 18 months. Love is a complicated activity, emotion, feeling, isn't it? But amid everything, I have felted it and lived it with you this time we have shared.

Because this passage is so familiar, and probably for most of us brings with it all kinds of memories and thoughts, it can be a challenging passage. I considered, briefly, putting us all on the spot and having each of us share what this passage means to us. What is love for you at this moment, in the context of our church here? That would probably make for a very rich and powerful sermon. What does it mean to be a loving Christian here in this place now?

I decided this morning, however, that I would not do that way and instead take the more traditional route, in my last chance up here with you, of talking for few minutes about what I hear Paul saying to us today in these words, as familiar as they are. I invite you though, to **think** about love this week, as you move through your tasks and live in your relationships.

It is believed that Paul probably spent 3 years living in the city of Corinth and working with these folks before moving on and communicating with them via letters. He loved these people. But they were a challenge! Sound familiar?

The city of Corinth was a melting pot. It was a port city with a lot of commerce. It was also a political hub as well as an artistic center. There was much wealth along side poverty.¹ The Corinthian church reflected the city's diversity. And, if the first several chapters of this letter are any indication, this diverse, gifted, melting pot church had their issues. And Paul, as always, is straightforward and directive with his advice. They struggled with their differences and jockeyed for who among them had the most 'right' way to be a Christian. Paul digs into the details of some of their squabbles and tries to help them sort things out.

As we come to the end of the letter here though, Paul begins to summarize. In Chapter 12, the chapter that immediately precedes what we just heard, Paul is talking about spiritual gifts - some of the more well known words of Paul. He writes, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone." (1 Corinthians 12:4-6) And then he goes on to give that beautiful image of the human body - hand, foot, eye - each part critical to the body just as all of us, with our unique gifts are critical, indispensable to the body of Christ, the church in the world today.

This makes the words of chapter 13 all the more powerful. Paul is calling into focus that one critical ingredient that makes this beautiful, diverse, powerful body of Christ/community of faith work.

It is almost as if something dawns on him and he wants to be sure the Corinthians don't miss the obvious. Having eloquently validated the equality and importance of all spiritual gifts, he now notes the one hierarchical exception: love.

Taking the human body image one more step, if we are the ears and eyes and hands and feet of the body of Christ, each with our indispensable part, then love is the blood that flows through this body. It is the love of God we know in Christ Jesus that gives us life, allows us to function, brings us the strength and energy to live our calling and be who we are. It is as the love of Christ flows through us that we are alive in our faith. Paul wants to be certain that the Corinthians understand this. Without love this body is nothing.

¹ Sampley, J. Paul, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol. X, pg. 775.

Paul makes his argument in three points. First, he points out the uselessness of trying to function without love. Everything is hollow without love giving it substance and meaning. “If I have all faith, as to move mountains but have not love, I am nothing.” “If I hand over my body, as in sacrifice to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” Love must be at the center of all we do.

Next he puts into words the essence of love. He is practical and concrete. Love is patient and kind. It is not jealous or boastful or rude. Love is all that is good in us. It is a verb and a noun. It is what we are *doing* when we are being compassionate and helpful. It is *who we are* when we are being just and faithful. This love is what we see and experience in Christ. *We* know this love in the person and life of Christ.

And love never ends. For Paul it is important that the Corinthians know that there is an eternal quality about love. All the other gifts we may have, knowledge, prophesy, physical strength, mental acuity, all of it, will pass away, (don't we know that as we age!) but love is eternal. It will transcend any and every dimension we can imagine.

His argument is tight and compelling. Love is something we work at. It requires focus and often great sacrifice. Yet it is everything we are about and what brings meaning to our lives. Nothing can take it from us, not time or space or anything we can imagine. Faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

There is something about this passage that I never noticed until I was preparing for the sermon. As Christ centered as Paul's writings are, in this, the most famous of his words there is no mention of Christ. We can easily read Christ into it, but he is not explicitly mentioned.

That puzzled me for a while. But I think it comes back to Paul and his friends in Corinth. Paul was writing to Christians, feisty, stubborn, thoughtful, devoted Christians. Their issue was not whether Christ was their savior, the one through whom they knew the love of God. They had made that confession. They knew that God is the source of all meaning and that, for them, it is Christ who brings that meaning to life. Their issue was rather, how that love they knew in Christ could be manifest *in them*. It is to this that Paul is speaking here.

Last Sunday I was up in Napa to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the PCUSA congregation in which my father was the founding pastor and my mother the founding organist/pianist. We moved to Napa when I was four years old. That

community loved, nurtured and challenged me into the person I am - the love of Christ manifest in a community of faith. I told them that last Sunday how much they meant. It was wonderful to be with them. 1 Corinthians 13 in real time.

We can't create a recipe for love, nor is there a definition that can capture it. What we can do, like the Corinthian Christians before us, is hear these words that Paul expresses so beautifully, and let them penetrate us.

I invite us all this week to take a phrase or a thought from this scripture and write it upon our hearts, or as a reminder that pops up on our phone every day maybe, or on our refrigerator doors this week, and let it soak in and then come back out in the ways we live. This is how we are faithful Christians. What will love be for you this week? How will you feel it? How will you live it?

I am ever so grateful for the time, and the love we have shared as we ministered together these past eighteen months. Thank you. I look forward to hearing and seeing where God's Holy Spirit takes you in ministry in the years ahead, where and how you will live out and be challenged by the love of God.

I will be around. There is probably a good chance we will cross paths again someday. For now may we all remember and know, faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love. Amen.