

The Priority of Love

(1 Corinthians 13)

We turn this morning to one of the most famous of all passages in the Bible. 1 Corinthians 13. Here Paul teaches us that the Holy Spirit places on the committed disciple the call to grow in love. The more fully we are willing to apply 1 Corinthians 13 to our congregational life, the more fruitful we will be in our shared life because we will be growing deeper in how we love. The gifts of the Holy Spirit, discussed in chapters 12 and 14, are closely tied to the fruit of the Holy Spirit. The essence of this fruit is love.

The more we desire to grow in love, the more fully we will know God and see the Spirit's activity working through us. So you see when we are growing by living fruitful lives in the Spirit there is more opportunity for the gifts of the Spirit to be given to us. The two are intricately connected.

I would like to suggest that in order for us to be revived with fruit-bearing power, dying has to precede reviving. If we are to see Christ and show Christ more fully within our life it will mean also choosing to die in the way Paul teaches us here. When we more fully understand what Paul is writing here we will see that the love described requires of us a willingness to die to self. So let's turn to look at this chapter more closely.

Analyzing these words is almost like taking a beautiful flower and tearing it apart. But some analysis is necessary in order that we might fully grasp what the Apostle Paul is saying here in this great poem to love. There are three aspects of love which he considers in this chapter: First, the preeminence of love over everything else; Then the practice of love in a very forthright and helpful way; and then the permanence of love, the enduring quality of it.

In Greek there are three words that are commonly used for our English equivalent of "love". The first is the word Eros. That word is used to describe erotic love, sensual love, what you feel when you "fall in love," a passionate attraction to another person. That kind of love is not even mentioned in the Word of God, strangely enough, though it is a common form of love today. The second kind of love is described by the word philia. This means affection, friendship, a feeling of warmth toward someone else.

This too is a universally distributed love, but this is not what is mentioned here. Paul is talking about agape, which is a commitment of the will to cherish and uphold another person. This is the word that is used about the love of God always. It is the only word ever used to describe his love. It is a word, therefore, addressed to the will. It is a decision that you make and a commitment that you have launched upon to treat another person with concern, with care, with thoughtfulness, and to work for his or her best interests. That is what love is, and this is what Paul is talking about.

Now this kind of love is possible only to those who first love God. Any attempt to try to exercise love like this without having first loved God is to present a phony love, a fleshly kind of love. The reason I say that is because the Scripture tells us there are two great commandments. The first is, "Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." The second one, Jesus said is, "Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself," {cf, Matt 22:37-9, Mark 12:30-31, Luke 10:27}. We try to turn that around. Many of us are trying to love our neighbor, whoever he may be, in our family or anywhere else, without having loved God, and it is impossible to do that. It is "the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit," as Romans puts it {cf, Rom 5:5}, that fulfills the definition that is given in this chapter, and only that love. Therefore, you cannot love other people until you first love God. However as the Spirit is given room to work in our lives in the way Paul is teaching here we will realize the preeminence of love and grow in this love.

The Preeminence of Love

Paul contrasts love here with certain things that were highly regarded in Corinth and are still highly regarded in the world today. The first is the ability to communicate. These Corinthians valued communication. They enjoyed eloquence; they admired oratory. They were especially entranced by the gift of tongues, the ability to speak in languages that had never been learned, which had been given among them, but which by the power of the Spirit enabled person to pray and praise God. They were making much of this gift, so Paul begins on that note. He says,

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.

Paul is saying is that to be a loving person is more important than to be able to speak in all the languages of earth or heaven. Therefore, it is essential to learn to love. One

who speaks in this way but lacks love has become, in a telling metaphor a "noisy gong or a clanging symbol. Although our translation has the phrase "noisy gong" the more accurate translation would be "an echoing bronze or a clanging cymbal" Corinth was particularly famous for its production of bronze vessels. Since the term *chalkos*, the Greek word for "bronze" is never used elsewhere to refer to a musical instrument, some scholars have proposed the phrase refers to bronze acoustic vases that were used in the theatres to echo and amplify the voices of the actors. They were a first century microphone. The "clanging cymbal" was associated with the cult of Cybele, noted for its wild ecstatic worship practices. Thus, Paul's point in verse 1 might be paraphrased as follows: "Even if you can speak with the heavenly language of angels, but have no love, your high-toned speech has become like the empty echo of an actor's speech or the noise of frenzied pagan worship,"

Paul then goes on to underscore the same point in what he says next.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 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.

The point the Apostle is make here of course is that without agape love, all our works, all our theology, all of the ways the Spirit manifests his presence in the congregation mean nothing. Love has to be preeminent.

This is an important text for us to hear at this time. As a congregation we decided last week to join the Essentials Coalition. This is a coalition that wants to affirm the centrality of biblical theology and ethics within the Anglican Church of Canada. As we face a decision this week about the blessing of same sex unions our way forward always has to be informed by what Paul says here. No matter how biblical our theology and orthodox our practice, everything we do has to be informed by the practice of love as Paul goes on to describe in verses 4-7.

The Practice of Love:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

Notice in this paragraph there are only three positives; all the rest are negatives. So love is really only three simple things, basically. It is patient, it is kind, and it is truth-filled. The quality of love we are talking about is that which produces patience, kindness and honesty. The negatives that are given here are associated with love because these are the things we must set aside in order to let the love of God, which is patient and kind and honest, manifest itself. In other words these are the things we have to die to.

All progress in the Christian life comes by first experiencing the cross and then the resurrection. That is a symbolic picture of all we repeatedly go through as Christians. To give up the pleasure which these negative expressions give us is to experience a kind dying to self. That is the cross. But it always results in a resurrection, a release of the power of God to reach out in patience, in kindness, and in honesty. That is the way to love.

God is ready to love through us if we are ready to renounce the false, the negative expression that we enjoy experiencing. I do not have to argue with you about that. We all know the perverse pleasure we get out of some of these negative qualities. We do not want to give them up. It is too much fun to rip people apart, give them a piece of your mind, make them suffer for all the injuries they have done to you; at least freeze them out; be silent toward them and let them stew a little bit in their own juice. You know how delightful that is, don't you? We want love, but first we want the flesh. That is why we do not experience the love of God. Therefore, we are given these negative characteristics to help us to understand what we must renounce.

What are the things that keep us from being patient? That word, by the way, is always used with regard to people, not circumstances. This word always means being patient with people so that you do not immediately wipe them out, or turn them off, but you are understanding, you wait patiently and let them work things out. The word actually means "a great suffering," enduring some suffering in order to let people have a chance to work out their problem. That is patience. Kindness means courteousness, to be gracious, to be pleasant to people. That is what love is. What are the things that stop that?

First on Paul's list is jealousy. We are often not patient or kind because we are jealous. We are spiteful and short with people because we see them enjoying something that we want. They have a relationship that we envy; they have a quality about themselves

that we do not have and we are angry about it, so we are short and spiteful. That is one reason why we are not patient and kind.

Next on Paul's list is boastfulness: "Love is not jealous or boastful." Oftentimes we are not patient because we cannot wait to listen to others. We are so anxious to brag about ourselves so they can begin to admire us. But that must be surrendered for love to appear.

Then, Paul says, love "is not arrogant." Arrogance is disdain, lack of respect for another person, ignoring how he will feel and asserting yourself, regardless of what the result may be.

Nor is love "rude," Paul says. This is to ignore another's rights; literally, the term is, "to be puffed up." It means to be haughty, or cutting, sarcastic. One of the major expressions of rudeness is sarcasm.

And "love does not insist on its own way." It is not stubborn. inflexible, insisting that everybody else adjust. It is willing to find a way, to examine a matter, to look at it from a different angle. When we get stubborn and inflexible and refuse to even talk about a matter we are choosing to exercise the self-centeredness of the flesh. Therefore, we cannot allow the love and patience and kindness of God to appear in that situation.

Then love "is not irritable or resentful." Nothing destroys human relationships more than that. Henry Drummond, in his great little message on this passage, *The Greatest Thing in the World*, writes about this:

No form of vice, not worldliness, nor greed of gold, nor drunkenness itself does more to unChristianize society than evil temper. For embittering life, for breaking up communities, for destroying the most sacred relationships, for devastating homes, for withering up men and women, for taking the bloom off childhood, in short, for sheer gratuitous misery-producing power this influence stands alone.

Finally, love "does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right." Love is not gloating over other people's miseries. Love does not gloat over another's misfortune, but rejoices in honesty, in the truth, when it is brought out. Love is willing to hear even

the truth about itself. It is not so concerned about being protected from hurt or injury as it is in knowing what is really happening -- what reality is. This is a great quality of true love. Paul now gathers it all up with this beautiful expression,

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Bears all things is literally "covers everything." Love covers. When it does learn something unpleasant about another it does not run and scatter it all over the neighborhood. It does not take delight in some of the misdeeds of others. Love covers it over, keeps it silent. Not that it will not do something about it, but it does not spread it about for others to hear.

Love "believes all things." That does not mean love is gullible. When Jesus was kissed by Judas in the garden he did not say to him, "Oh, Judas, what a beautiful kiss. I'm so glad you have changed your mind and are showing this." No, he understood that this was a traitorous action. He said to Judas, "Would you betray the Son of man with a kiss?" {Luke 22:48 RSV}. He was not gullible. He did not believe that action of Judas. Nevertheless, love is ready to believe anything that has a ground of reality to it. It is always ready to start over. What this phrase means is that it is ready to trust somebody anew. It does not assume the attitude, "Well you've done that three times before and you did not do it right so I'm not going to trust you anymore." If somebody wants another chance love grants it.

Then, third, love "hopes all things." No cause, no situation, no person is ever regarded as totally hopeless. There is always a place to begin again. Love will find it; it never gives up hope. Thus Paul adds the final word in this section, love "endures all things." Love never quits; it never gives up on anyone.

It has been pointed out that you could take this paragraph and insert "Jesus" in place of the word "love" and you would find that it fits perfectly. "Jesus is patient and kind; Jesus is not jealous or boastful; he is not arrogant or rude; he does not insist on his own way; he is not irritable or resentful; he does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Jesus bears all things; he believes all things; he hopes all things; he endures all things." When you read it that way it is clearly evident that love is the character of Christ. That is what the Holy Spirit is seeking to reproduce in us, so that becoming Christlike means becoming a more loving person. This is the measure of our spiritual growth.

At the heart of a Spirit filled community is the call for us to become the kind of people described here. The whole purpose and thrust of the work of the Spirit is to teach us to be loving, patient, kind, forgiving, understanding, giving others a chance, trying over again, open to correction and instruction ourselves, easy to be entreated. These are all the qualities that can be produced in a Christian life. That is what makes life worth the living. This is the measure of true Christian spirituality.

And it is the only kind of Spirituality that is lasting. Time does not allow us to look at verses 8-13 this morning, other than to say that this kind of love never ends. As we understand the significance of this passage we will affirm that agape love is preeminent, practical and permanent and will in response to our love for God seek to practice it all the days of our life.

Here is an exercise I would invite you to complete this week. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you areas where you can grow in exercising patience kindness and truthfulness. Also ask him to reveal to you those areas in your life where you exhibit the negative characteristics and ask him to help you rid yourself of them.

Perhaps you would like to share this exercise with your spouse, a brother or sister in the congregation, or with a member of your home group.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

Patience: The word, by the way, is always used with regard to people, not circumstances. This word always means being patient with people so that you do not immediately wipe them out, or turn them off, but you are understanding, you wait patiently and let them work things out. The word actually means "a great suffering," enduring some suffering in order to let people have a chance to work out their problem. That is patience.

Who are the people to whom I am called to exhibit more patience?

Kindness means courteousness, to be gracious, to be pleasant to people.

To whom am I called to show increasing kindness?

Jealousy. We are often not patient or kind because we are jealous. We are spiteful and short with people because we see them enjoying something that we want. They have a relationship that we envy; they have a quality about themselves that we do not have and we are angry about it, so we are short and spiteful. That is one reason why we are not patient and kind.

Of whom I am most jealous?

Boastfulness: "Love is not jealous or boastful." Oftentimes we are not patient because we cannot wait to listen to others. We are so anxious to brag about ourselves so they can begin to admire us. But that must be surrendered for love to appear.

When are the times I am most tempted to be boastful?

Arrogance: Arrogance is disdain, lack of respect for another person, ignoring how he will feel and asserting yourself, regardless of what the result may be.

When have I treated another person like this in the last week, two weeks or month?

Rude: This is to ignore another's rights; literally, the term is, "to be puffed up." It means to be haughty, or cutting, sarcastic. One of the major expressions of rudeness is sarcasm.

Am I ever sarcastic? If so, what are the situations that bring this vice out in me?

Love does not insist on its own way. It is not stubborn, inflexible, insisting that everybody else adjust. It is willing to find a way, to examine a matter, to look at it from a different angle. When we get stubborn and inflexible and refuse to even talk about a matter we are choosing to exercise the self-centeredness of the flesh. Therefore, we cannot allow the love and patience and kindness of God to appear in that situation.

When am I stubborn and inflexible?

Love "is not irritable or resentful. Nothing destroys human relationships more than

that. Henry Drummond, in his great little message on this passage, *The Greatest Thing in the World*, writes about this:

No form of vice, not worldliness, nor greed of gold, nor drunkenness itself does more to unChristianize society than evil temper. For embittering life, for breaking up communities, for destroying the most sacred relationships, for devastating homes, for withering up men and women, for taking the bloom off childhood, in short, for sheer gratuitous misery-producing power this influence stands alone.

Do I have a temper? What is the Holy Spirit saying to me about this? In what ways does he need to help me change?

Love “does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right”: Love is not gloating over other people's miseries. Love does not gloat over another's misfortune, but rejoices in honesty, in the truth, when it is brought out. Love is willing to hear even the truth about itself. It is not so concerned about being protected from hurt or injury as it is in knowing what is really happening -- what reality is. This is a great quality of true love.

Am I able to hear the truth about myself? Do I enjoy hearing about the moral failures of others?

As part of this exercise you may want to memorize verses 4-7 so they become part of your waking life, allowing you to recall them at will.

Bless you as you grow in loving as Jesus loves.