



## *“The Bottom Line”*

I Corinthians 13

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Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

It’s one of the best-known passages in the Bible. I’m referring, of course, to the Epistle Lesson, 1 Corinthians 13, commonly known as “The Love Chapter.”

I did a Google search on 1 Corinthians 13 that resulted in over two million references. There were also two website links: one for art related to 1 Corinthians 13; the other a link to Amazon.com for books on the chapter. Apparently there is money to be made from The Love Chapter!

1 Corinthians 13 is included in many world literature textbooks as an example of excellence. It is often quoted in speeches. Phrases such as “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things...” or, “When I was a child I thought as a child...” or, “now abide these three, faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of them is love” are part of modern consciousness.

Quite often, 1 Corinthians 13 is read at weddings. In fact, the familiarity many of us have with the text robs it of its original power. Planning for a wedding recently, the couple specifically requested that 1 Corinthians 13 not be the Scripture Lesson. They said it doesn’t belong at a wedding since it’s not referring to romantic love. True enough, the kind of love 1 Corinthians 13 speaks of is much larger than love and marriage.

For all the above reasons, 1 Corinthians 13 is an intimidating text for a sermon. Not only is it well known and loved, but most of us already know that love is the bottom line of Christianity. How can any of us put this remarkable text, near poetry, in a form that is close to the lyrical excellence of the text itself? How do you put an abstract noun in concrete form? How to change what is essentially a hymn into prose?

Frankly, I think, the real intimidation of the text goes deeper. It serves as a mirror in which we behold ourselves and fall short. Who wants to stand up front and talk about an ideal picture of love he or she does not have mastered? No one is close to the ideal, and we all know it.

I’ve never preached a sermon from this text. The other texts for the day seem easier. I told Gloria I was going to take a chance and use 1 Corinthians 13 as my sermon text. She told me it was OK since she would be out of town! There you have it. We all know we fall short, and no one wants to hold up this ethical ideal as if we have it mastered.

There seems to be a real disconnect between our Christian profession and our everyday practice. That is difficult for Christians and the church. Who has not heard the accusation, “You Christians talk about love but...”?

Reality has a way of tarnishing all human ideals. Back to that wedding I mentioned earlier. Everybody at a wedding deeply believes in the power of love. Those familiar cadences, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things...” are not empty thoughts thrown into the air. We all hope for the best for the newlyweds and many of us will pray their life together will last forever. And yet.... And yet, love doesn't endure all things and love cannot or should not believe all things. Hope does run out and the best of intentions and effort sometimes, too often fail. Relationships break.

It's easy to fall in love. Staying in love is another matter. Planning a wedding isn't difficult. Making a good life together is. Romantic love just happens. Attraction and chemistry combine with selling ourselves to another and we decide to give our lives to each other. But staying together doesn't just happen. Permanence is intentional, deliberate, and difficult.

The Christian love Paul refers to in our text is quite different yet in many ways the same. Romantic love is exclusive, sexual and monogamous. Christian love is inclusive, ethical, and if I may use the word, promiscuous. We are supposed to love lots of people indiscriminately – even the entire world.

The dynamic of romantic love and Christian love is, however, the same. God's intention for the Christian community is love that is universal, healing, inclusive, reconciling and ultimately redemptive. And however we happen to become part of the Christian community of faith, we enter with high hopes for just such an experience. We are, after all, part of the kingdom of God. We sincerely believe that we can be different, that the community can live up to its calling. The depth of our faith in God is why the disillusionment and pain is so great when the community fails at love.

In this congregation, upon entering we take solemn vows. We bind ourselves to God and each other “to walk together in all God's ways.” We mean to experience and to model the reconciling and redemptive love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

We know full well that the one thing Jesus said we must do is love God and one another. Furthermore, we know the truth of the old song, “What the world needs now is love sweet love, not just for one but for everyone.” And yet....

And yet, we continue to be fully human and bring all our humanity to church every time we gather. In his Children's Sermon last week, Al Bunis asked the children if they knew things adults in church disagree about. I wanted to shout out, “Everything!”

Of course! We all have points of view that differ, and we all misunderstand each other's points of view. Disagreeing is as normal as breathing. It's *how* we disagree that is the issue.

No one lives up to our expectations of them. The church cannot live up to our expectations of it. Unmet expectations are one of the destroyers of relationships. Loving each other is easier said than done.

During his sermon at my installation as Senior Minister at Colonial Church in Minneapolis, my friend, Wayne Stacy, looked at me and said, “David, every day will not be like today. They won't always love you like this.” And it's true. Time tends to erode all relationships. We will disappoint each other. And in the face of reality, will we still love each other?

So, I think you understand why this text is intimidating! It seems like an abstract ideal and, truth be told, unattainable.

But the text is not an abstract bit of theological dreaming. Nor is it merely an ideal toward which to strive. Paul knew something about reality, and he also knew something about the power of Christian love.

1 Corinthians 13 comes at the end of long letter to a troubled church. The central issue was relationships – it usually is. The congregation was deeply divided about theology, ethics, worship, love and marriage. There was a case of incest troubling the church, members were taking each other to court, and fights were breaking out at the communion table.

If that weren't enough, they were at war about the proper style of Sunday morning worship. Should worship be a time for unfettered, unstructured exuberance? Or, should worship be solemn, dignified and orderly? The stakes were high. Not only were relationships breaking, but the reputation of the church in the neighborhood hung in the balance.

In the midst of a long argument about order and disorder in worship, Paul says, "Let me show you a 'better way.'" We call it 1 Corinthians 13, The Love Chapter.

Paul begins dramatically and autobiographically. If I preach with the eloquence of an angel and my faith is large enough to move mountains; if I am so generous my donations amount to millions; even if I am martyred for my faith, but I do not love you, my religious rhetoric is mere noise, my faith is empty, and my spiritual resume is a big nothing.

The love that Jesus wants of us is deeper than words, religious piety, even good works. In fact, this love is not really a noun. It is a very active verb.

Paul does not offer an ordinary definition of love. Instead he uses fifteen verbs to describe it. Love is not an idea; love is activity. It is patient and kind. It does not envy, it is never arrogant or rude. It doesn't insist on its own way, nor is love resentful. It never rejoices at the expense of another. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It never ends. We don't have it mastered now, but someday we will know and experience the love that fills the heart of God. Until then, we keep on believing, hoping, and loving.

At the risk of subtracting from a beautiful word picture, let me offer a suggestion or two. This love called Christian love is the simple yet difficult act of turning toward another person. In the New Testament, love is always specific. It is directed toward an actual man, woman, or child. It is concrete, specific acts directed toward a particular person. It is love offered to whoever comes into my life.

This love always begins with God. This is not our love, a force we conjure up by our own will power, or dependent on the attractiveness of others. It is the love of God who always turns toward us and who moves toward us in acts of loving service. The story of the bible is the long narrative of God taking the initiative and moving toward God's alienated creation. Before we ever knew God's name, God gave his heart and life for us.

And, all God wants from us is faith and love. Faith is turning toward God in trust and service. Love is turning toward God and our neighbor in acts of service. Come to think of it, faith and love are two sides of the same coin. Both are turning toward God and each other.

And because this love originates with God and is given freely to us, we can give it back and offer it to each other. It's not easy and it takes a lifetime to learn, but we can turn toward each other and serve one another – and the world.

The journey of faith is, at the same time, a journey of love. God is forming, or re-forming us in his own image.

And so we live out of faith, learning to love and always in hope. And here and there, we catch glimpses of the love of God in the faces of each other. I've seen it. So have you.

I don't often watch religious television. But last week, late at night I turned on the religious cable channel. Usually watching religious TV makes me laugh. Often I am ashamed and occasionally I get mad. How can these characters say what they say and do what they do in the name of Christ?

This time I experienced something new. I was afraid. I watched the preacher of a mega church in Ohio. I cannot get his face out of my mind. He told his congregation and viewers what we must believe and how we must act – and in no uncertain terms. His face was twisted by anger as he tried to control us. I had to change channels.

But I have another face in mind – maybe you do too. This face is like the face of an angel. Her name is Joan. She was widowed when her daughters were adolescents. After they left the nest she devoted her life to her congregation. She was an indefatigable angel of love and mercy to anyone in need. She outworked those of us twenty years younger than she.

She used to end nearly every conversation with a simple phrase, “Love, love.” She meant it. She loved everyone. She would not be deterred from that love. I never heard her say a mean or discouraging word about anyone. She is a Christian woman. Like I said, she has the face of an angel.

I have other faces in mind, too. I look into your faces and see flashes of the brilliant love of God. I hope you can see that love in my face, too.

We've a long way to go. But we're making progress. We've come a long way. It's excruciatingly slow. We grow by inches it seems. So we continue to trust God to re-form our hearts. We hope for that time when we will love as we are loved. And in the meantime we're learning to love.

And so these three remain: faith, hope, and love – and the greatest of them is love.

Amen.