

Love is...

1 Corinthians 13

February 1, 2009

Today begins a sermon series on the nature of love in which we will look closely at the most popular and widely quoted chapter in the bible, 1st Corinthians 13, the Love Chapter in the Bible. It is read at most Weddings. In fact, I read it at all the wedding I perform.

In fact, the chapter has become almost exclusively used for weddings, but it was not intended to be so. It is not in a wedding section of Paul's letter. In fact, it comes in a section about Christian living and ministry. It is sandwiched into a discussion about the use and misuse of spiritual gifts in the early church. The early church was hung up on spiritual gifts—on showy displays of divine favor and spiritual power and one-up-man ship. On who could perform miracles and do acts of power and show off for the crowd. Who could speak in strange tongues and interpret these languages, who could prophecy or give divine interpretation or great words of wisdom or who was an inspired preacher who could mesmerize the crowds with their great oratory... it had become less about serving God and sharing the faith than about who could stand out from the rest and who would be considered better than the others...look at me, look, God loves me best! Just like a bunch of little children! In fact, Paul calls them little children in the letter, and often in not so endearing terms.

So Paul says that he will show them an more excellent way to live and to seek to follow God...

Paul begins by reminding them and us that Love is central to he Christian life. It is essential to our faith and to our experience and without love, the rest of it is without real value. The gifts that they seek and treasure, are all ok, in and of themselves, but without love, none of them amount to much. You know how it goes... I may speak with the tongues of men and even of angels but if I have not love, I am no more

than a noisy gong or a clanging, crashing cymbal banging off key. I may have the gift of prophecy and see the future, I may have all knowledge but if it is not tempered with true love, what do I really have? Nothing, zip, nada.

I may give up all I have and even give up my own life...but if I have not done so in love, it accomplishes nothing,...

Love is at the center of who we are as Christians. It is not AN important element, one among many, it is THE important element.

But how do we know what real love is? What do we have to compare it to? There are a lot of wrong thoughts about love in his day, and not surprisingly, in ours too.

It is not true that the heart takes control of us and it loves whom it chooses....we love first with our heads, then with our hearts. Love is a choice we make consciously, of the will...

Love is not—it is never having to say your sorry. Far, far from that.

Love is not a warm puppy.

Love is not a hurricane.

Love is not a masquerade.

Love is not a fairy tale. It is real, it does last and it does endure. In fact, it grows as time goes by.

As we begin to think of what love is, we must begin with a who, not a what...the who is God.

Love begins with God, for God is love. Here is how it is written in the First letter of John:

“Dear Friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is Love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love, not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:7-11)

This is love, not that we have loved God...but that God has loved us and sent his God Jesus to be the means by which our sins are forgiven. This is the beginning of our understanding of the true and deep meaning of what love truly is. The word used most commonly for this love in the Bible is the Greek word Agape or Agapo, which denotes a deep, abiding selfless love that is willing to sacrifice itself for the sake of the beloved. A love that is willing to give without receiving, to love unconditionally but knowingly and openly. God knows us better than we know ourselves. God knows our secret thoughts and our hidden sins, yet God CHOOSES to take the initiative and to love us anyway. Agape is the love that does not wait, but seeks us out the other. It is the love that reaches across the table, across the battle lines, across the argument, across the ages to find the beloved who is lost and alone and afraid and defiant. Agape is the love that is willing to do whatever it takes to make peace and to restore the beloved...even if that means paying an incredible price personally out of love. This love is full of grace and the recipient of such a love always feels somehow undeserving and awestruck...whether in a marriage or faith knowing in our hearts that we are undeserving of such a love, but also knowing that such a love calls us to seek to live up to its calling. Agape calls us to a joy and a peace that we have otherwise not known, for being loved with an unconditional, accepting, forgiving love so sets us free that we are

made new within and a journey of gradual renewal has begun from the inside out. Sometimes it takes a lifetime...of starts and stops. Sometimes we do things to test the love, stupid things, hateful and hurtful things to see if our beloved will still love us even if...even if... Only to find that the body is still broken for us, the cup is still poured for us...the love us made new each morning and God's Agape...his unconditional, self sacrificing love is fresh and new each day.

We are loved beyond measure and this is the beginning of our faith.

As we come to know this love at the heart of our faith and the center of our lives, it sets us free to love one another. not just in general terms...like I love all humanity (and like Lucy in the Peanut's cartoon... "It's people I can't stand")...but to love another in a similar way that God loves me...to love with Agape, a self giving love.

As Paul begins to define love in this chapter he tells us two things that love is...along with several things love is not and a lot of things love chooses to do.

Love is patient and love is kind. Both of these are active choices you make in how you relate to other people. The first, patience, is how you relate to what the other person does to you. The second is what you do actively to them.

Love is patient. The word he uses for patient is important and quite different than the usual one used in the scripture. The usual word is one of my favorite. The usual word for patience is "hupomona" which means to "stand up under the pressure" ...a great image for endurance or patience, especially if you think of the Holy Spirit as the Helper who comes along side you and helps you stand up under the load, literally helping you shoulder the weights you are carrying. I like that image.

But this is not that image. This word is an old testament word often used of God's patience. It means to be long suffering, to have forbearance, to show self restraint in the face of provocation... It is literally Makro—Thymia...Thymia is like thymos...fire or heat. It means literally to control one's heat or temper. It is to control one's anger or wrath. This is not passive resignation or uncaring. It is not being blind to the facts or overlooking the facts or faults. This is choosing your words with wisdom and love and seasoning your response with kindness and compassion. It is leaving sarcasm out of it. It only leads to hurt feelings.

When you love one another enough to fight fair, or to not fight at all, merely to talk things out in loving kindness. To talk things out like it really matters...and choosing what matters enough to make something out of it, and what you let go by...you can't swing at every pitch!

The second action of love is active...love is kind. Kindness seems simple enough to define, but in reality, it is quite a bit more than you might expect. To be kind is more than just being nice all the time. It is not being polite or nice, it is being active and being purposefully helpful. It is thinking of the other person and what their needs might be and then seeking to meet those needs. It is thinking what they might like or want and then trying to meet those needs...not with some ulterior motive, like trying to win their favor in some way or get them to do something for or to you...but simply because it is something you can do for them. In essence, kindness is about living out agape...the selfless love. It is about trying to meet the needs of others rather than self. A person who is loving is always kind. You can not be loving and unkind. How can you be loving in heart and unkind in action? Or loving in mind and unkind in word?

A kind word turns away wrath. A kind word heals the broken heart and binds up the wounds of many. A kind heart is to be treasured above many.

Love is kind. To put love into action, without seeking recognition or reward solely for the benefit of others.

Here again is the Agape love of God, being made real in the lives of others. Seeking to make the love of God real in the lives of others. The actions can be simple, from a kind word, a simple hand written note, help with a simple chore, a ride to the store, or some other act of grace that is done without fanfare or accolade or recognition simply to help another soul in need.

The encouraging thing is that love is simple. We can all be long suffering...we can all be kind. How would your relationships change if you sought God's help in becoming more patient...and more kind? In simple ways you would be more self-less and more self-giving? Less self-serving and more gift-giving? If you focused on how you could be helpful and kind in all circumstances to all people? If you could learn to be patient and long suffering even when you are not at fault and when your spirit is grieved...when you could show the love of God and the patience of true love?

And remember, here is where it all begins. Right here, right now. God is waiting here for you. Jesus loves you...right now, right where you are. You don't have to clean up for him. You are ready, just the way you are. Remember, this is love, not that we have loved God but that God has loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which we are forgiven. These elements, the Bread reminds us of Jesus' body broken for us, the bread of heaven come to earth for us to eat. The cup and wine remind us of his life given for us, his forgiveness poured out for us and for all...for us, for me and for you. He invites us to come, be renewed. Be loved. He is waiting at the table to meet us.

Here is my prayer for each of us today, taken from Paul's letter to the Ephesians;

“And I pray that you, being rooted and established in LOVE, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge---that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3: 18-19)

THE TABLE IS SET, ALL ARE WELCOME,
COME AND RECEIVE THIS COMMUNION.

AMEN