



Sunday January 30, 2022

Pastor Tony Acompanado

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany)

Does anyone else find it hard to believe that January is almost over already? But now that it is, you know what's just around the corner – that's right, Valentine's Day! And soon many of us will be exchanging heart shaped boxes of candy and cards filled with silly or sentimental expressions. While others will be delivering flowers to workplaces, going out to dinner at a special restaurant, leaving for a romantic getaway or planning other ways to express their love to someone special.

And today, as we read the apostle Paul's "love chapter" from 1 Corinthians just two weeks before Valentine's Day, it feels to me a bit like those who set up the weekly lectionary readings cut a deal with the people at Hallmark. For many, these next few weeks leading up to and in particular Valentine's Day on February 14th marks a time to celebrate love, and while there are some who reject it as a materialistic, commercialized waste of time, it nevertheless seems that we are surrounded by countless reminders of love. But are we really, though?

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

Today's reading from 1 Corinthians is probably the most recognizable and quoted passage of Paul's writings. And these days, it's extremely common to hear this famous chapter on love quoted at weddings appearing to praise the value of romantic, human love. Here you'll find "Love Never Ends" appearing in beautiful calligraphy on creamy white invitations and couples blissfully meeting at the altar, holding hands, and promising each other the "greatest" of all gifts.

What's often missed however, and maybe it's even intentionally ignored, is that this text was first written to a community that was having a very difficult time staying together. Ironic. Paul declares love as the greatest power in a community that seems to be lacking a lot of it. And this moment is a far cry from an adoring couple standing at the altar declaring their unwavering devotion to each other.

When we look closer at this text and pay attention to its original context, we realize that Paul's letter isn't aimed at starry-eyed lovers at all. Paul isn't writing to people who cherish and desire each other; he's writing to people who can't stand the sight of each other. He's a frustrated and deeply puzzled leader, calling an out of control and self-destructive church to get its act together before it destroys itself. So, knowing this context helps us to better understand that 1 Corinthians 13 wasn't meant as a comfortable and touchy wedding message, instead, it's an accountability smackdown intended to motivate a dysfunctional community to action.

To highlight this even further Paul places this beautiful poem in the middle of a discussion about spiritual gifts. And what Paul is saying is that these gifts and the fulfillment of their various functions, while inherently good, is simply not enough to sustain a community. And in chapter 13 Paul talks about love as the missing ingredient.

Unlike the marriage vow moment, Paul doesn't present this passage to affirm an ethic that's already present in the community. Instead, he presents this passage as a way of introducing an ethic that is necessary if they are to have any chance of surviving the muddy waters of difference and disagreement that arise in the midst of personal and social relationships.

Much like our own worshipping community here at Ascension, the Corinthian church was not a homogenous body. It, like Ascension was comprised of a mix of ethnicity, gender, age, class, status, and life situations. The diversity within the Corinthian church generated both benefits and challenges. Unfortunately, this diversity among the Corinthians dissolved into conflict and rivalry. But Paul remains firm that this diversity is non-negotiable. God has created and called this community to be diverse and to get along within that diversity.

And while Paul's letter to the church in Corinth was originally intended to move a worshipping community forward, it can certainly be translated outside a faith community as this is God's design for all human interactions.



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The issue of division within the Corinthian community is not completely unlike our own contemporary society. We're no strangers to the kind of division in communities of which Paul speaks – more than ever families, friends, schools, congregations, and communities are divided across political parties, over who is welcome, over the value of people based on their economic status, mental health, color of their skin, language they speak, or the origin of their birth. If we're being honest then we're all too often guilty of pride rather than humility, of impatience rather than patience, of selfishness rather than compassion, of hate rather than love. And as for our strategies for negotiating these divisions...well, these leave much to be desired.

Paul says that love is patient, kind, and selfless. It involves truth telling, courage, loyalty, and tolerance. In terms of what love "is not," Paul says it is not self-seeking, short-tempered, and offensive. In other words, love does not hurt or exclude or oppress people. It does not damage possibilities for honest and authentic community. Love does not obstruct another's humanity. Love is the only means by which we have any chance of living fully in communion with God.

But make no mistake. The love that Paul is talking about here is not passive and fluffy. This kind of love is an up early, feet on the ground, tools in hand, working kind of love. It builds communities and it nurtures positive social interactions. The love that Paul speaks of unifies. Love is the way by which we talk to each other, eat with one another; fellowship together and affirm the worth of every human being. Love like this transcends every one of our self-imposed systems and personal biases. It forms holistic people who are centered in the well-being of others. This kind of love will not let us down if we genuinely live in it together. And while these standards that Paul describes are most certainly difficult to attain, they are nevertheless worth striving for.

If love is patient and kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; if it does not insist on its own way; if it is not irritable or resentful or does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. If love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, and never ends – then what exactly does this say about love?

And why is this kind of love so difficult then? Maybe it's because loving this way is always risky – because we cannot enter into it without being transformed. And when we're faced with this reality, we may just ask ourselves, "Do I really want this?"

Author Jan Richardson says, "Loving is never just about opening our heart. It is about being willing to have our heart become larger as we make room for people and stories and experiences we never imagined holding. It is about being willing to have our heart become deeper as we move beyond the surface layers of our assumptions, prejudices, and habits in order to truly see and receive what—and who—is before us. It is about being willing to have our heart continually shattered and remade as we take in not only the brokenness of the world but also the beauty of it, the astounding wonder that will not allow us to remain the same."

The very character of God is love. And it was this love that led God to send his son to live among us. It was this love that led Jesus to gather in an upper room with his disciples. It was this love that led Jesus to the cross. It was this love that led Jesus to a cold and dark tomb. And it was this resurrection love that overcame the powers of sin and death to redeem us forever.

I read somewhere that love is that thing which, if we have it, we don't really need anything else. But if we don't have it, whatever else we have doesn't really matter all that much.

What might our families, schools, churches, workplaces, communities, and world be like if we were to live this kind of love every day? My prayer for each one of us is that we will put all our trust and hope in this love because – It bears all things. Believes all things. Hopes all things. Endures all things. And IT WILL NEVER END! Thanks be to God! Amen.