

"Love in Action"  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana  
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## 1 Corinthians 13

I have met with a couple who is getting married in May - their names are Jack and Savannah. They are not members of the church; they are from out of town but are getting married in Indianapolis and were given my name by a mutual acquaintance. I was happy to help them and have enjoyed getting to know them over the last few months. Jack is finishing his MBA at Northwestern, and Savannah is completing medical school at IU here in Indy. Needless to say, they are very bright individuals!

When we met last week to talk some more about their wedding, we discussed the scriptures they would like to use as part of the ceremony. They had a couple of passages that they had thought of, and they asked me for any suggestions I might have. I mentioned Romans 12 and a couple of the Psalms. Then I said, "Of course, there's always 1 Corinthians 13." To which they both said, "Yeah, we've heard that one a lot at many of the weddings we've been to." Needless to say, they're probably going to use some other scriptures for their wedding!

It is true that this chapter from 1 Corinthians is often read at weddings - maybe our own, or weddings that we have attended recently. That is because it speaks of what love is and how God's love is the source of a couple's love for one another. This passage has to be one of the most beautifully-written passages in the whole Bible, as Paul speaks simply and completely about love to the Corinthian Church - and to us today.

At the end of wedding sermons, I usually give a charge to the couple which goes something like this: "There are those gathered around you here, and those who could not be here, all of whom will be with you throughout this journey you are about to embark on. They will share in your plenty and want, will rejoice in your joy and grieve in your sorrow, will care for you in your sickness and be by your side in your health. In times of trial or loneliness, do not hesitate to call on them, for that is why they are a part of your lives. Above all else, remember that you are children of God, and because God loves you, you will forever be nurtured in your love for one another."

"Because God loves you, you will forever be nurtured in your love for one another." That is at the heart of what Paul is saying to the Corinthians, and to us. And what Paul speaks of is more than a romantic feeling which makes us all warm inside. It is about the gospel of Jesus

Christ, and he is speaking these words to a church which is far from being harmonious or at peace.

The Corinthian Church was one of the earliest churches Paul founded, but also one of the most diverse. This reflected the cosmopolitan city in which it was located. As a result, there were many opinions about how individuals were to live their lives, and how the church was to function. Throughout his first letter, you will find references by Paul to both individual practices, and how, as a community, they were to be the Body of Christ. It is into this conflicted situation that Paul tries to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the first paragraph, he reminds the Corinthians that it does not matter how gifted you may be, you are nothing without love. I can speak with the eloquence of angels and mortals, I can foresee the future like a prophet and understand things others cannot comprehend, I can give all that I have away to those who are in need – I can do all those things and more, if I desired. But if I do not have the love of God in my heart as I am doing them, then “I am nothing; I gain nothing; I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” Good acts are good, but they are worthless unless they are motivated for the right reasons, namely out of love.

That leads Paul to describe what love is. This list is so familiar we could probably recite it from memory. Patient and kind, not envious or boastful, nor arrogant or rude; it doesn't insist it have its own way; not irritable or resentful; it doesn't take pleasure from wrongdoing, but is joyful when the truth is revealed. Love can carry the load, believes anything is possible, never gives up hope, and will last forever.

Throughout this list, love is the subject of every verb. It is not a sentimental feeling which remains in our hearts or is abstract. Instead, it is the source of the action – it acts. Paul is trying to tell the Corinthians that their conflicts are the result of not acting out of love for one another. Resentment, arrogance, boasting – these things are not present when love is present. “The impression one gets is that love primarily functions in situations of stress and conflict, anything but the romanticized version so popularly held” ([Texts for Preaching: Year C](#), 128-129).

Paul concludes by making clear that spiritual gifts will not last forever, but love will. Our gifts which God has given to us are important, and are meant to further God's kingdom while we are here. But they will last only as long as we last on this earth. They belong to the present, the time in which we are living. When we know that God loves us and that everything we do comes from that love, then that is when we are transformed. It is like our development from children to adults; the change which takes place is monumental in our understanding of the world. So is the change which takes place when we come to accept God in the form of Jesus Christ as Lord.

The love that Paul speaks of here is rooted in our knowledge of God's love for us. God gave of himself – sacrificed on our behalf – that

which was most precious to God: his only Son. That is the love we know as Christians. The Greek word used for this sacrificial love is “agape.” It is not a love that is sensual, or a love that is on the surface of a relationship. Agape love is rooted in the willingness to think first of the other, and live one’s life with that motivation.

Paul calls on us to live out this agape love because God has first shown us agape love in his Son, Jesus Christ. If we have been loved in such a sacrificial, boundless way, why shouldn’t our lives be embodied by that love for our sisters and brothers in Christ? Why shouldn’t we listen, speak, act, all with love as our motivation? That is why, as Paul concludes, “Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

I wonder sometimes if we take for granted that greatest gift of love. I wonder if sometimes we come here on Sundays and assume that everyone’s been welcomed; or everything has been arranged; or everybody is feeling as comfortable as we are. I wonder if sometimes we believe that we can relax in showing God’s love to others for a bit, just to give ourselves a break from the demands God requires of us. And then that break becomes a habit, and that habit becomes a way of life, and that can lead to a community which is closed, not open, to the love of God.

I have witnessed that in other churches, even churches I have been a part of, and I have seen what happens: they dwindle, deteriorate, and die. I have served on administrative commissions in our presbytery to close churches and sell their property. That is what will happen to any congregation which believes that God’s love has limits and cannot be shared with all the world.

Are we doing everything we can possibly do to emulate the love of Christ in our life together? Is church something we make room for in our daily rush of activities, or do we schedule everything else around being here on Sunday mornings and other important church activities during the week? Do we reminisce and wonder about those who have not been here for a couple of weeks, a month, or longer, or do we pick up the phone, stop by for a visit, and take the active steps to remain connected, so that they might know they are missed and loved? Do we come thinking first of what we need today to be filled and rejuvenated to make it through another week, or do we come thinking first of what we can do for the person sitting next to us to help them in love?

“Now faith, hope and love abide these three. But the greatest of these is love.” Is it for us? Do we live our lives accordingly? How do we emulate that love as an Open. Caring. Community?

The strongest proof of love in marriage is not how you feel when you first meet someone and begin a life together. It is how that love grows, stretches, and endures over many highs and lows in life. The same is true of God’s love. The proof of God’s love is not just that you

feel good knowing God loves you. It is proven more and more whenever you are tested, torn, and stretched to the breaking point, and then are lifted out of despair into the comfort of a patient, kind, and merciful Lord. Whether it is in times of personal stress, or in times of challenge for the church, that is when we know that the love Paul spoke of is real and alive.

Another way we are reminded regularly that the love Paul spoke of is real and alive is in this meal. When we come to this table, we taste and see the depth of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. It is earlier in this same letter to the Corinthians that we hear the words of Paul which we use every time we celebrate this meal. Paul says: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (11:23-26). As often as we celebrate this meal, we proclaim God's love in action to a world which desperately needs to know such good news.

Thanks be to God for the sacrificial love we know in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God for the opportunity we have to live lives of thanksgiving for this agape love first shown to us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.