

Shocking Love
Dr. D. William McIvor
January 31, 2010
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

Today's lesson is the lovely and familiar thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. Its rhythmic cadences and simple but expressive language make it a favorite of people within and without the church. Out of all Paul's writings it is most likely to be chosen for an anthology of great literature. 1 Corinthians 13, especially the middle paragraph, can often be found, printed in fancy calligraphy and suitably framed, hanging in homes or offices.¹ A "hymn to love" it is called, or sometimes just "the love chapter." Even people who don't even know it comes from the Bible know they like it. Have finer words about love ever been written? I don't think so. Alongside these words, everything else sounds trite and incomplete.

1 Corinthians 13 follows immediately chapter 12 which Susan DeHoff was preaching from last Sunday. Chapter 12 talks about the body of Christ and spiritual gifts. And Paul ends that chapter with these words: "But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way." What is that more excellent way?

1 Corinthians 13.1-13 (NRSV)

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. 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. 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.

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. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Introduction

When brides and grooms plan their weddings, if they want scripture read at all, they usually select 1 Corinthians 13. I always honor their request because with some couples I'm just happy that they want something from the Bible. But I do often think to myself *these poor kids don't have a clue about the kind of love 1 Corinthians really talks about*. The love being thought about by a young bride

¹ Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, J. Clinton McCann, Jr., James D. Newsome, *Texts For Preaching, Year C* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 127.

and groom is probably in a different universe from the love Paul wrote about. And sometimes I want to stop in the middle of the reading and say, “Do you really understand that this love is not the love that you have yet? You have fallen in love, romance lights your every moment, and you are very attracted to each other. But none of that is the love Paul describes.” I don’t say that but sometimes I want to.

Paul would have no patience for what we call “young love.” Real love takes every ounce of our maturity, hard work over a lifetime, and waking up every morning asking God for the grace to help us love despite others and despite ourselves. We can fall in love or into romance or into attraction but we cannot fall into Paul’s kind of love.

We should remember that the Corinthian church to which Paul wrote was a confused congregation. They were divided in their loyalties. They were quarrelsome in their disputes over spiritual gifts. And they were sometimes lax in their morality and arrogant in their spirituality. Paul says to them, “I will show you a still more excellent way.” And that is love: practical, powerful, and down to earth. This love is what we really need.

ONE: Love is what we really need

“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.”

I sure don’t like to hear that. I make my living by words and I work hard to speak good words and right words and powerful words. The preacher’s proverb is Proverbs 25.11: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” I want my words to be apples of gold in settings of silver. But Paul says eloquence without love is auditory pollution.² Without love, the greatest speech by the greatest rhetorician or the greatest sermon by the greatest preacher is a cymbal dropped on the floor by the percussionist during a quiet moment in the symphony. I really don’t like Paul sometimes.

But he doesn’t pull back here. These are strong words because love is not something weak or sweet or sentimental. Love is tough. And we need tough love.

“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.”

Prophetic power, understanding all mystery and knowledge, and all faith. Wow. If I were Aladdin with a magic lantern, those would be my three wishes. Forget money and fame. With prophetic power and knowledge and faith you can make as much money and be as famous as you want.

But do we not want these gifts in our Christian lives? The Corinthians had them in abundance. They were noted for their discernment, knowledge, and faith. But they lacked love. You see, there were Corinthians back then and Christians today who know everything about Jesus except that he is love. There are Christians who know the Bible backwards and forwards but who use it to beat everyone else over the head. There are Christians who have faith and do move mountains but those mountains divide and separate. Without love, Christian discernment, knowledge, and faith become just nasty and mean-spirited.

“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.”

² William H. Willimon, “The Greatest of All Is Love,” *Pulpit Resource* 23.1 (1995): 20.

Here Paul even calls into question the ways of self-sacrifice. Giving everything achieves nothing if there is no love.

A young professor told of being on a plane one time in the late sixties and finding himself next to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He introduced himself to Dr. King and, as their journey progressed, he revealed to the great civil rights leader that he was also active in the struggle on his own campus. Because of his work in the racial struggle, he had become alienated from his father. He told Dr. King how his father could not understand him and how they had grown apart.

“What can I do,” he asked Dr. King, “to raise the consciousness of my father, to make my father see that he is a racist, that all of his pious talk about ‘loving black people’ is just a lie?”

Dr. King put his hand on the angry young man’s hand and said, “Your father is doing the best he can. He has not had many of your educational opportunities, opportunities which your father has provided for you. As a Christian, you must be patient with him and love him.”³

Self-sacrifice, giving oneself away even for a great cause is worthless without love. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a great man, not because of the cause he led, but because of the love he lived.

We don’t need eloquence though eloquence is nice. If we don’t have love, we don’t need knowledge and faith even though they are God’s gifts. We don’t need self-sacrifice if we don’t love. What we really need is love for without it we are noise, we are nothing, we gain nothing. Oh, dear friends, we need love.

TWO: What is this love we need?

So what is this love we so desperately need? Nothing is worth anything without it. So what is it?

Fortunately Paul is very clear here and he gives us a checklist and we can go down the list and grade ourselves. See how well you do. **LOVE** is:

- Is patient
- Is kind
- Is not boastful
- Believes all things
- Is not irritable
- Is not resentful
- Is not envious
- Bears all things
- Is not rude
- Endures all things
- Does not rejoice in wrongdoing
- Rejoices in the truth
- Is not arrogant
- Hopes all things
- Does not insist on its own way

There are fifteen subjects on the love report card. I gave myself 1 A, 4 Bs, 4 Cs, 2 Ds, and 4 Fs. That’s somewhere between a C- and a D+ grade point average. I haven’t flunked out of love’s school yet but I certainly am a worry to the Head Master.

Now I suppose that some of you might in your kindness want to bolster my GPA and say, “Oh, Bill, you’re a lot better than a D+.” I don’t think so. You see, the love report card is *not* graded on a curve. It’s graded by the standard of Jesus Christ and compared to him I don’t fare very well. Perhaps you don’t either.

Maybe we do poorly on the love report card because we make love too complicated. Paul made it simple. We make it hard. We want to deal with big things and grand causes and Paul gives us a checklist for how we treat our spouse and our children and the person next to us and the obnoxious kid next door.

³ Willimon, 20.

Love gets us down to the real things, the kind of people we are inside, the kind of people we become when we grow up, if we ever do. Have we who are no longer chronologically children put an end to childish ways? If only love endures and if we flunk love's report card and still act like children, what hope is there for us? It sounds like we are doomed.

And we are ... except for God and God's love. God pops into this chapter right in verse 12 though we have to be alert to see God. Verse 12 says: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." *There is* God around us and underneath us, holding us in love. God fully knows us. We see dimly. At best we know in part. But at our best and at our worst, God knows us and embraces us in love.

Conclusion

So because we are loved by God, we are challenged to love like God loves us. And that means we must get past the sentiment of love — real love isn't a feeling — and take up the works of love — real love is what we do. I called this sermon "Shocking Love" because I think what Paul wrote shocked the Corinthians. The words of love are beautiful. But they are intended to shock us beyond emotion and into action.

Most of you will recognize the name of Elie Wiesel, the well-known Jewish theologian and author. He is a survivor of the Holocaust. His family live in Hungary during the dark days of the World War II. The Jews knew what was happening and Wiesel's family was simply waiting for their time to come, for the Nazis to arrive at their door and take them to labor camp. Or worse.

In one of his books, he tells about a peasant woman by the name of Maria. Maria was almost like a member of the family. She was a Christian. During the early years of the war she continued to visit them. Even after non-Jews were no longer allowed into the Jewish ghettos, Maria found her way through the barbed wire, bringing the Wiesel family fruits, vegetables, and cheese.

One day she knocked at their door and said there was a cabin that she had up in the hills. She wanted to take the children, of whom Elie was one, and hide them there before the SS troopers came. They decided after much debate to stay together as a family, although they were deeply moved at this gesture. Wiesel wrote that if other Christians had acted like her, the trains rolling toward the unknown would have been less crowded. If priests and pastors and bishops had raised their voices, the Nazi's hand would not have been so free. But Christians thought mostly of themselves. A Jewish home was barely emptied of its inhabitants before they descended on it like vultures.

"I think of Maria often, with affection and gratitude," he wrote. "This simple, uneducated woman stood taller than the city's intellectuals, dignitaries and clergy. My father had many acquaintances and even friends in the Christian community. Not one of them showed the strength of character of this peasant woman. Of what value was their faith, their education, their social position, if it did not arouse their love. It was a simple and devout Christian woman who saved the town's honor."⁴

Paul said, "I will show you a still more excellent way ... Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

⁴ Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996) 61.