

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday after Epiphany
February 3, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 54:4, 7-10

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

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.

Is Love All You Need?

These verses from *1 Corinthians* are used frequently at weddings. If you have witnessed that, then, very likely, there is some sentimental feeling as you heard the familiar words this morning. Recently, I heard these verses at a funeral, which should not surprise us, since that time of fear, wonder, and **consoling love** come much closer to the full intent of Paul in writing these words. This is in stark contrast to another famous use of the word “love” in popular culture. For some of us of a certain age, we remember the Beatles tune from the 1960’s: “**All You Need Is Love.**” the refrain that stays in our head is repeated in the original song: “Love is all you need... Love is all you need... Love is all you need....”

But, after reading and studying this passage I believe there is much more to say about love both generally and specifically, as we explore these verses in *First Corinthians*. Some of you may be bracing yourselves, thinking that I will start a **deep analysis** of the scripture. Others will be relieved that this will skip the “**history lesson**,” as one of the elders of my first congregation described the details of living in Palestine 2000 years ago. Well, there will be less historical perspective in our time together today. And, although any portion of **Paul’s writings** would lend themselves to analysis, we will avoid the classic “Three-Point” sermon: those well-reasoned presentations that were based on logic and rational explanation of the Gospel and most of the miracles.

One reason that I avoid these step-wise sermon presentations, is that they remind me that well-meaning pastors were intent on influencing the thinking and actions of the congregation with rational approached to the scriptures and the Gospel message itself. During the last half of the previous century, the mainline denominations overdid it in rounding off the “hard edges” of the *Bible* stories. They left the parishioners with little to “chew on,” because all the “tough” parts were removed from all discussion. Intentionally or unintentionally, most pastors from the 1950’s through the 1980’s felt encouraged to simplify the unexplainable, to emphasize plausible **explanations** for any number of mysterious goings-on throughout the *Bible*, and generally to “water down” the challenges involved in **living a life** called by Christ. In summary, they made becoming a **disciple** into some kind of mental exercise with little need for commitment and removing the challenge and the **mystery** that is at the heart of our **faith journey**.

Paul has a much different approach, as did most of the early church. In our faith, we do not take on the **yoke of Christ** because it is **rational** or easy or simple. Instead, we take it on for the **irrational** reason that Christ **calls us** to it and actually demands it of us! And yet, through our faith this should not be difficult at all. Because, Christ told us:

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me....

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:29a, 30 NRSV

Words like these from Jesus move us beyond the everyday, the routine, and any self-serving approach to life that we might have. These **words of Christ** asks us to move into new and unimaginable territory with Him! Of course, we can use reason in this move into spiritual fulfillment; but, truthfully, rational thought rarely take us anywhere that is useful in becoming a disciple.

So, when we read a passage like this one from the apostle Paul as we have this morning, because of Christ we are not receiving a **take-it-or-leave-it** proposition. Instead, we are receiving a **multi-layered insight** into the complex nature of faith and action and purpose that makes up being a Christian- a person who **believes in Christ** and follows the example he provided us in life, in death, and especially as the resurrected and Risen Christ.

Since becoming a follower of Christ involves challenges, I was reminded of a story from a few years ago involving a character named “Bubba.” He was an interesting fellow, as the stories described him as unsophisticated and a bit of a character. But, most people don’t know that Bubba cleaned up his act, finished college, and fulfilled his lifelong dream of completing medical school and becoming a **board certified orthopedic surgeon**. After all of that time and

commitment, all the testing and training, Bubba had just one more task to finish his dream and to become fully certified in his specialty: He had to pass a thorough **oral examination** with questions from the leading surgeons in the field.

The day came, and Bubba entered the room. The distinguished panel, three experienced and brilliant orthopaedic surgeons welcomed him. Then, they asked Bubba some questions.

Yes, Bubba knew the importance of lining up the long bone of the leg for knee replacement surgery in order to achieve the best result.

And, Bubba knew that a slightly crooked bone in a healed fracture in a young child would grow straight over time, so there was no reason to operate on the healed fracture to correct it.

Bubba sailed through questions about emergency care and the risks for an older patient having surgery.

At this point, Bubba was pretty much in the clear and would probably pass, perhaps with distinction. Then came the last question.

“Dr. Bubba,” began the chair of the panel. “If you had a patient with a two-year-old fracture of the humerus, the long bone of the upper arm, and that fracture **had not healed** over that time, how would you approach the problem?”

Without hesitation, Bubba replied, “Well, you see, Doctor, this fracture should have healed after six months. You already told me that he cannot work, because you told me that he was a skilled carpenter. He needs this surgery as soon as possible, so that he can heal the fracture and get back to a full and rewarding life.”

“Thank you, Dr. Bubba. Now can you your surgery plan for this unhealed fracture of the long bone of the arm for corrective surgery.”

Bubba did not hesitate: “Well, folks, it’s like this: You got to prepare the arm with sterile technique to prevent infection. You get a good power saw and bone graft ready to take on the fracture sight and a state-of-the-art plate and screws to join together those ends of the bone so it can heal.”

“That sounds exactly right, Dr. Bubba. But, what surgical approach would you make to get to this fracture?”

Bubba responded in kind: “Oh, man! I’d grab that scalpel, and I would cut on the outside of that arm, and I’d take that cut down deep- straight to bone. Yes, Sir! That’s what I’d do- straight to bone!”

The panel stopped and leaned back in horror. “But, Dr. Bubba, what about those important structures in the area of your surgical approach: the large artery and vein and the large nerve to control the patient’s hand? Will you protect them with retractors? And, that ‘straight in’ approach you described- the all-important radial nerve that goes around the outside of bone and gives power and strength to the forearm and wrist- it is right there in the way! What would you do about that nerve?”

And, Bubba did not hesitate: “Well, if they’ve gotta go, they’ve gotta go!”

Like Bubba, we often have, or look for, **easy answers** to problems and questions that require a lot more thought or that are far more important than we realize. And, that is the same situation we face when we study these verses, the **words of counsel** from Paul. At first, Paul addresses some of the concerns about **spiritual gifts** that the Corinthians believe are important. Paul has already told them that the **Gospel message** is far more important than eloquent speech, knowledge, prophecy, or speaking in strange tongues. Rather than lecture them further with his sharp words and rhetoric, Paul reaches out in a **loving embrace** of words that stands on its own.

At the very **heart** of the Gospel is **love**, Paul says. Love offers far more than these very human gifts and abilities which he lists for us. **Love endures** and surpasses all of the things that the Corinthians felt were important about faith and the **spiritual gifts** among the congregation. Paul wants to **refocus** the Corinthians, and probably himself, on this core aspect of the Gospel: the teachings and **ministry of Jesus Christ**. It is as if Paul is saying, “You may have a lot working for you, but none are as important to God as the lone quality and gift of love.”

Paul emphasized love to the church at Corinth. He wanted them to focus on love in its broadest sense. So, if all you need is love, which kind, or **form**, of love do we have in mind? Is it just one of them, all of them, or a **select few**? What is Paul referring to? In fact, is Paul directing the Corinthians, and **you and me**, to the very things that Jesus is **demanding** of us all? What or **whom** do you love? For that matter, what or whom do you **fail to love**, and why?

Paul McCartney and John Lennon were being interviewed in the early 1970's. When asked why the Beatles changed the style of their music, they had a very **thoughtful response**. They both stated in their own way with those Liverpool accents, that they had great commercial success with songs of longing and wanting, what we generally call “**love songs**.” But, as they grew as artists and traveled around the world, they observed so much more going on in the world. They felt that they **had to express** that musically, and their success and financial independence allowed them to explore **new areas** where they had never been in music, but also in their living.

Now, this may have been frankly spiritual for a couple of the band members, but all of them agreed that the attitudes and the ethic of **all four** of them was changing toward their profession as writers and performers of popular music. They felt that they could write any number of successful love ballads, but they already had achieved that. They wanted to address the many **other aspects** of life and living that they had encountered.

And so, they wrote about **headlines** that they read. One popular song was based on the bewildering story of a serial killer who was a medical student, resulting in the strangely upbeat song: “Bang, Bang, Maxwell.” They wrote about **loneliness and isolation**, producing the haunting music and lyrics of “Eleanor Rigby.” They wrote about the elation and thrill of **making music** and even in entertaining themselves, through their hit album and single: “**Sargent Peppers Lonely Hearts Club**.” Even if you are not a Beatles fan, you can think of other performers that did similar things: Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger with their songs about the **values** and hidden treasures of being a free person in the United States. Or, you we can look at the excitement around the folk songs of Peter, Paul, and Mary and the quantum leap of music to the frank and challenging songs of **Bob Dylan**.

At any rate, there is a lot that we can see in music that moves the **listener** beyond a typical love song. So, by the same standard the **apostle Paul** may be writing about **love**, but his

approach has more to do with **human relations** than romance, especially if we look at the original Greek. When we do this, we realize how limited we are in having only the one word for love in English.

So, very likely somewhere along the way, someone probably told you that there are several words for “love” in Greek: **brotherly** love, *philia*; **romantic** love, *eros*; and, love of concern, **empathy**, and compassion, *agape*. In these verses, Paul is addressing the compassionate regard, or love, for others that **Christ showed** for everyone. He is encouraging them to show heartfelt **sympathy**, even empathy, for others: this includes the persons familiar to the Corinthians and those who are **strangers** to them.

For us today, this is the attitude we require to **live into our mission**. We must approach everyone we encounter for what they really are: **children of God**. Jesus embraced the unloved and the outcasts. This means that we must **accept** even those persons who are not easy to approach, along with those whose **lifestyle** we do not accept and those whom we might feel have made any number of **poor choices** in their living.

Jesus asks us, and Paul adds **emphasis** to questions like these: Do you and I have the ability to **modify** our approach to others to be **inclusive** when everything in our being tells us to walk away or reject the person in front of us? Are our **actions and choices** consistent with the teachings of the apostle Paul: conquering every obstacle imaginable? Or, are we simply smiling in our friendly, detached manner that gets us down the road and off to **our next engagement**, meeting, appointment, or meal with someone far **more familiar** to us?

At the beginning, we looked at the Beatles hit and asked if **love** was **all we need**? And so, the words of this sermon title echo the old Beatles tune: **All You Need Is Love**. I did that on purpose, of course, because that sentiment of the song may be true: even theologically accurate. But, the concept of “love” must be far **broader** than the emotion and feelings for another person which we feel as part of an intimate relationship. Love is **all important**, because love is the substance, the **core**, of the life of faith; **God’s love** for people becomes the force that enables us to **love others**. In *1 Corinthians*, Paul informs us that so much of what we value, even **spiritual gifts**, pass away or come to nothing. Love is what **endures**.

In keeping with our musical theme, I will paraphrase the Beatles and ask if **love is all that we need**? That could be true in a superficial sense. But, Paul reminds us that there is much more to **grounding** and **growing** our faith. Indeed, we need compassion, empathy, selfless intentions, and an open and **willing spirit** consistent with the love of **Jesus** in order to provide a better **witness** for Christ.

But, it is difficult to hold all of those together by design or intent. **Paul knew this**, just as Jesus did. Paul wants us to remember this **broad form** of love. We need this special form of love, the *agape* love, in order to deal with a distrustful and **confusing world** around us. We need the love Paul showed for the many **imperfect believers** in Christ at nearly every church he established. And, in our faith journey and in our call as disciples of Christ, we will need all that Paul is asking, even **demanding**, of us: the forbearance and **tolerance** of the shortcomings we see in others, the faults and **irritating habits** of our own family members, the **imperfections** of our children and our spouse, the **complex relationships** that we have with so many of our neighbors, family, and friends. I believe this is the **core message** behind these closing words of Paul:

“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

1 Corinthians 13:13 NRSV

Love may not be all that you need, like the old Beatles song. But, it is a very good place to **start**. But, more importantly for us and our faith journey, it is **powerful** and will help us to maintain our faith, our **living**, and our hope- **in Christ**.

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