

Sermon 111217 Love
Scripture 1 Corinthians 13
Sermon Title Paul's Love Letter

St. Paul is given credit for writing roughly half of the New Testament but if his only published writing was the thirteenth chapter of the first letter to the church he started in Corinth, he still might be considered one of the most important writers in the Greek language. Certainly, if you have attended weddings in your life you have heard, "Love is patient, love is kind... and the greatest of these is love."

These are beautiful words and sentiments but Paul would be surprised, maybe even shocked to learn that this passage is read at weddings. He was speaking of another love entirely from the romantic love celebrated at weddings.

To understand the love that Paul was writing of, we need to look at the rest of his letter. Also, it will help for us to know a little of the situation he was dealing with in Corinth. So, let's put on our history hats and archeology vests and Bible glasses and make a little visit to Paul's Corinth.

Corinth is an archeological ruin today. It sits on an isthmus, a narrow strip of land connecting to larger landmasses, Greece proper and the Peloponnesus. It was a sea faring city with a reputation for trade and shipping, and sailors looking to do what sailors do when they hit land. Corinth had a reputation of unruliness.

When Paul arrived, remember, there was no such thing as Christianity. He was the only one in the city who even heard of Jesus. Corinth, religion wise, was typical of the age and region. There was a small faction of Jews but most people worshiped many Gods. Immigrants brought in gods like Isis from Egypt, Artimus from Ephesus, and Astarte from Syria. Like other cities in that age and part of the world, Corinth had its main god. The most striking geographical feature of Corinth is a steeply rising peak called Acro-corinth overlooking Corinth. A vigorous tourist today can climb up Acro-corinth to find the ruins of a temple to the goddess Aphrodite. According to the Greek historian Strabo, Aphrodite employed some one thousand sacred prostitutes, a point no doubt not lost on the visiting sailors of the day.

Paul lived in Corinth with a Jewish couple named Priscilla and Aquila, leather workers like him. They introduced him to the local synagogue. As a distinguished guest, Paul was invited to address the congregation. He zealously proclaimed that a Nazarene named Jesus who, only some twenty years earlier had been crucified in Jerusalem, was the Messiah and Lord of life. Synagogue leaders pronounced Paul a blasphemer and heretic and ordered him to leave and never show his face again.

He did leave, but not without taking with him a number of Jews including one of the leaders of the synagogue named Crispus. Paul set up a Christian house church at Priscilla and Aquila's where he preached

the gospel for around a year and a half before moving onto Ephesus. A few years later, while still in Ephesus, he started receiving news of happenings in the Corinth church that he felt he needed to address. First Corinthians is part of that effort.

We only have Paul's response to the situation and he only gives a fragmentary picture, but it is clear that all hell had broken loose. Foreshadowing Christianity from then on, the Corinthian church had split up into a number of factions. One followed Paul himself, one followed Peter, another Christ, some seemed to deny the humanity of Christ, some claimed to have the gift of 'prophecy' or speaking in tongues, one guy was living with his mother-in-law as husband and wife which was against both Roman and Jewish law. There was more, but you get the picture. Things could not have been much worse. The Corinthians were, in short, ordinary people who had yet to grow into the people, spiritually speaking, that Paul exhorted them to be.

In the letter Paul fielded their questions as best he could- questions about sex and marriage, women's role in the church, dietary restrictions and such. He preached the gospel of Jesus Christ- to pray for your enemies, care for the poor, put others before yourself. This was in the face of what any ten year old then or now could tell you... that in order to get ahead in this world be quick on the draw every chance you get. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there. Paul's message ran counter to that.

Paul told them who this God is and who this Jesus is. He was seeking transformation for the spiritually unprepared. He writes, “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet... Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (15: 51, 57-58) We don’t know if the folks back in Corinth saw things that way, but God love him, Paul sure did.

In this letter, Paul is calling the folks who were bickering to their best angels. The root of the famous love chapter, chapter 13, is in the twelfth chapter. In chapter twelve, Paul is addressing those who were professing themselves to hold spiritual gifts- prophecy, tongues, healing, miracles and so on. He is saying that everyone has gifts of one sort or another and it causes divisiveness to put yourself above others because you think your gifts make you more important than the other. He writes, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord.” (12: 4). He uses the image of the human body to make his point, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need for you’” (12: 21) He is saying, don’t hold yourself as more important than others. We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord. We bring different things to the table but we make one body of Christ.

Now in the famous thirteenth chapter, Paul is teaching us how we are to be one body in Christ, one in the Spirit and one in the Lord. We accomplish this by making our contributions in love. If we do what we do in love, factions will disappear, divisiveness will end we will become one.

Now, for a moment we have to dial ahead to our times and the English language. It has been said that Americans have a hundred names for money and one word for love. I love the tired feeling I have after a vigorous work out at the Y. I love peanut butter cookies. I love Ray Charles music. I love the Patriots. I love my wife. Well, obviously, those feelings and emotions that I feel are hugely varied but we English speakers are stuck with one word- love.

Greek has many words for love. Two of the Greek types of love are *eros* and *agape*. *Eros* contains romantic love but is not restricted to romantic love. *Eros* is not the love Paul was writing of in the love chapter. Paul is speaking of in *agape* love. *Agape* is God's love for humans, and only as God's gift are humans enabled in moments to love that way themselves. *Agape* is love that flows from God to us and then through us to others.

Eros is love that tries to fill our emptiness. *Eros* love is love for what is lovely and lovable. Not so with *agape*. *Agape* does not want. It gives. It is not empty. It is full to overflowing. A good example of *agape* might be the tale, *Beauty and the Beast*. Beauty does not love the

beast because he is beautiful but makes him beautiful by loving him. *Agape* is patient; *eros* is chomping at the bit. *Agape* puts up with anything; *eros* insists on having its own way. *Agape* is kind, never jealous, boastful, or rude. Paul says that, “Love never ends.” (13:8) God is eternal therefore so is *agape*. There is no doubt that *eros* ends. *Eros* ends when the desired becomes undesirable or the desire ends.

Agape is transforming love. It is love that begins with God and, when we get it right, flows through us to others. When he wrote the thirteenth chapter, Paul likely thought of that moment of his own revelation on the Damascus road when *agape* turned his life around. *Agape* was the most precious thing Paul ever received and the most precious thing he ever had to give.

Will you pray with me? Loving God, may each one of us know your love and be empowered by You to share it with the world. AMEN