

**First Corinthians 13: 1-13 “Grown-up Kind of Love” Rev. Janet Chapman 2/9/25**

**You would think we have been working up to Christmas with all the hype in the media over this afternoon’s football game, and we aren’t even in Philly or KC. I can only imagine the sea of red at my former church’s worship service this morning in Kansas City and I remember all too well the chidings from parishioners saying, “Now Janet, today is not the day for one of your long children’s moments – we’ve got to get out of here on time, if not early, to get ready for the game!” Anyone who dared say to a Chiefs fan on Sunday morning, “Well it’s just a game!” would be cancelled in a heartbeat. And that was when the Chiefs were losing... I’m sure it is out of control now! It is an obsession for some folks, maybe you know one or two who live and breathe football? A story is told about a man who was seated next to a woman at a football game. The woman was following the game with extreme enthusiasm. She seemed to be there by herself because the seat on the other side of her was vacant. The curious man asked if that seat was taken? She answered, “It used to be my husband’s seat, but he passed away.” “Oh, I’m sorry,” he responded. “Isn’t there anyone else who could use the ticket?” “No,” she said, “they’re all at the funeral.”**

**The reality is that tomorrow the game will be over; there will be a winner and loser, and we’ll go back to living our lives, hopefully not forgetting what truly matters in life. Nowhere is that expressed more profoundly than in our scripture today. The apostle Paul authored one of the most beautiful chapters of literature the world has ever known. You hear it at weddings and funerals alike but note that Paul didn’t compose this chapter thinking, “Gosh, I’m going to write a poem that can be read at weddings, funerals, and Valentine’s Day for all to enjoy.” Our first task, therefore, is to rescue the text from the quagmire of romance and sentimentality in which popular culture has given it. In considering its context, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, a port city which was known for its substantial trade and commerce industry as well as for the Isthmian games, an athletic festival second only to the Olympic games. Being such a city, they, like us valued competitive sports as well as making a good living. The church Paul founded there began to experience deep divisions around issues of abuse, sexual**

immorality, legal disputes, resurrection of the dead, and participation at the Lord's Supper. The congregants represented a variety of social and economic classes, ranging from wealthy heads of households to slaves. That diversity sparked controversies between the "haves" and "have-nots" with the growing tensions being swept under the rug. The character of Paul's writing indicates he sees the church at a watershed moment of crisis and testing. Will they pay attention to Paul's words and recover a disciplined unity in the faith or will they disintegrate due to pride, rivalry, selfishness, and self-indulgence? How can he speak to this ornery, conflicted community?

The words come from beyond the human soul as he writes, "If I speak in tongues of human beings and of angels but I don't have love, I'm a clanging gong or a clashing cymbal." This would grab their attention because Corinth was famous for its production of bronze vessels. The city was also inundated with Greeks and Romans who worshipped many different gods and valued knowledge above all else, so he adds, "If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge... but do not have love, I am nothing." He goes on to define this crazy thing called love, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." Then he adds some words in this beautiful chapter of poetry that aren't as poetic but are words that all the beauty rests upon. Verse 11 says, "When I was I 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." Based on this, it appears that the kind of love Paul is talking about is a grown-up kind of love. Now I know that Jesus says we are to be like children, but he was speaking of believing like children, of holding onto a childlikeness which is characterized by joy and wonder. He wasn't saying we were to behave like children. There is a difference. Childlikeness is identified by one's willingness to trust and surrender whereas childishness is reflected by one's ego, one's desire to get their own way, often at the expense of others.

Thus Paul says, "If I give away all my possessions and hand over my body so that I may boast...". So that I may boast – did you hear it, that ego, that need to brag, rearing its head and snuffing out love? Thus, we gain nothing. Yet the word

on the streets is different – it says the one who finishes with all the toys, wins. I got mine and you get yours, and we always look out for number one. That is not unlike small children who go around with one word on their minds, “Mine!” They rarely say it once, it’s usually, “Mine, mine mine!” But for the grown-up Christian, there is no such thing as “mine!” There is only what God has shared with us. The grown-up Christian knows that every heartbeat is a gift; every penny or nickel is a gift. If you think about it with a willingness to surrender to God’s truth, what do we even have that is not a gift? Because everything is a gift, it is no less than blasphemy when we cry out, “Mine,” or at the very least, it is childish. P.J.

O’Rourke jokingly paraphrases this text by saying, “When I became an adult, I put away childish things and got more elaborate and expensive childish things from France and Japan.” Isn’t that true for many of us at one time or another? But in the book of Acts, we read about the earliest church community being described as sharing what they had and by sharing, they distinguished themselves as a different kind of community. Robert Wright points out that although Paul uses the word, “love,” countless times in this text, the word “our” is what captures the true meaning of being a “grown-up Christian;” “ours” not “mine.” Learning to understand not as a child, but as a grown-up that we are all in this together, that the words “both/and” reflect a mature love far better than “either/or.” Sharing what we have is part of a grown-up love, but as we know, some folks never grow up. So Paul’s words are as relevant today as they were in the first century.

Sharing is only a piece of the puzzle of this grown-up kind of love. Within the word “ours,” we find the significance of being together in community with each other. Even the desert fathers, the mystics, who spent decades in the desert trying to grow closer to God discovered the importance of regularly gathering with each other to celebrate communion and share a common meal. Afterwards, they would discuss any problems that may have arisen as well as insights they had been given. At the heart of this gathering was their need for one another so that they wouldn’t be tempted to believe in their own self-sufficiency. A story was told about one elder who undertook a 70-week fast, eating only once a week during all that time in order to become more receptive to God. When he was little

more than bone and vapor, he asked God to reveal to him the meaning of a certain Bible passage, but God wouldn't do it. Disappointed by how little this experience of fasting had done for him, he decided to go ask one of his brothers what the passage meant. The minute he left his room, an angel of God appeared to him, saying, "Your 70-week fast didn't bring you closer to God, but now that you have humbled yourself enough to go to your brother, God sent me to reveal the meaning of the passage." And so the angel told the elder what it meant and went away. I'd like to think that the elder went on to visit his brother anyway, breaking his fast with the other, and swapping stories about what a sense of humor God truly has. At the very least, most of us need someone to share our stories with. At a deeper level, most of us need someone to help us forget ourselves, to become less self-absorbed, to stop childish thoughts. This means not always thinking of the self first and foremost, not having to be the center of attention, and not trying to be right all the time. It takes a real grownup to admit that he or she is wrong. And it takes a real grownup to accept an apology and move on. This type of sharing is present in a grownup kind of love. We're getting older, but Paul is challenging us to grow up into a mature kind of love as we do.

Leonard Ravenhill tells a story of a group of tourists visiting a picturesque village. They passed by an old man sitting beside a fence. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked, "So were any great or famous men or women born in your tiny village here?" "Nope," the old man replied, "Just babies." The point is that we all start at the same level but through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are encouraged to grow up in the full stature of Christ as Ephesians states. Some say the Body of Christ, the church, is in danger of disintegrating in our life span but I prefer to say we are just in one of those awkward growth phases, like when we were teenagers. Remember those times of acne and awkwardness, when we were trying to sort out who we were and what we believe. In such a time as this, we need the words of Paul to remind us how to grow up, how to hasten the day when we put away childish things. "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, a grown-up kind of love.