

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

February 3, 2019, The 4th Sunday of Epiphany/Ordinary Time

Psalm 71:1-6, I Corinthians 13

LOVE—A STILL MORE EXCELLENT WAY

Years ago when I was working one of the many summer jobs that helped put me through school, a co-worker came into work with a story I've never forgotten. The day before she came home to the old house they had recently bought, to find her boyfriend changing the oil in his car. Something made her look at the container into which the oil was draining. What she saw was a beautiful Spode China Soup Tureen under the car. Now for the uninitiated Spode china is a beautiful English china, often with very intricate and distinctive patterns. A soup tureen is a really big covered dish used to serve soups and stews.

He was draining the oil into a 100 year old heirloom.

When she started screaming at him to stop, he answered: "What's the problem, there's boxes of it up in the attic above the garage."

Once she'd given him a different oil pan, she went up into the attic and discovered twelve place settings, and all the accompanying platters and serving dishes for a set of Spode china that was over 100 years old.

Taken on its own the soup tureen was beautiful, at least to those who knew what they were looking at. But sitting in the midst of all the pieces of that set of china spread out on the dining room table, it was part of something so much bigger and so much more impressive.

I Corinthians 13 is a bit like that Spode soup tureen. Taken on its own it has a definite beauty, "Love is patient, love is kind...", the words have echoed through so many wedding services through the years in this Sanctuary. It may have been read at your own wedding.

In the past ten years or so it has also been read at many funerals here in our sanctuary.

You may have heard I Corinthians 13 called the Love Chapter. It has a lot to say about how we love the people around us.

But we won't understand all that Paul was saying to the Corinthians then, and to us gathered here this morning, if we don't put this passage back inside the letter to the Corinthians. The verses can stand on their own, but they have so much more to say in context. The Love Chapter is part of a bigger set of words and teachings from Paul.

Last week we spent time with I Corinthians 12 where Paul spoke to divided people in the church in Corinth, and reminded them that they belonged together just like a body needs all its parts. He was writing to a young church that had very different people in it, with very different spiritual gifts, and very different ideas of what was good and right and true.

He reminded them that God's Holy Spirit gives each person their own spiritual gifts, or gifts of faith, to be used to help the church of Jesus Christ.

All the different ways of expressing faith are needed for the church to be the church.

Church members are to care for each other with their differences, and respect those differences.

The 12th chapter of the letter ends with Paul encouraging the Corinthians to strive or work for the greater spiritual gifts and then he writes: "And I will show you a still more excellent way."

Which leads right into the 13th chapter, the Love Chapter. The answer for a church that is

divided, that has people thinking their faith and life is more important than those around them, or isn't important enough, is to love one another with the challenging love that Paul writes about.

"The still more excellent way" is the way of love.

If we pull the 13th chapter away from the 12th chapter we lose this understanding.

Paul is saying that love is how we heal the divisions.

Love is how we act like the church of Jesus Christ,
on the inside of the church, among the members.

The word that Paul uses for love in I Corinthians 13 is the word agape. In the Greek language of the day, and in the Koine Greek language of the Bible, there were different words for different kinds of love.

There was romantic love, or eros.

There was the love of friendship, phileos.

And there was agape love, which is the unconditional love we see God having for each of us.

The word agape didn't show up much in other writings from the first century A.D. (C.E.), but in the Greek New Testament it shows up over 300 times.

When people share agape love they are caring more for the other person, than for themselves. With agape love we strive to love the way God has loved us unconditionally.

One author calls it the "giving and forgiving love" that always desires goodness for the one we love."

She says agape love (~~is "directed or willed by the nature of the"~~) comes from within the one doing the loving, "which means it can remain strong even when the" one we love "runs away."

Agape is the word used in John 3:16: "For God so loved (agape) the world that God gave his only Son," and in 1 John 4:8, "God is love (agape)."

Green, Joel B, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, eds, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 1 Advent through Epiphany*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018, p. 216

So Paul says in the midst of all that makes us different from each other,
in the midst of thinking we are better than someone else,
in the midst of causing divisions in the church,
in the midst of thinking we're not as good as someone else,
in the midst of using the spiritual gifts we've been given,
in the midst of trying to be people of faith,
in the midst of Sunday worship, commission meetings, youth group, Sunday School, PW, Bible Studies, the Session and Deacons, and all the other ways we live out our faith,

Paul says:

if we don't live with agape love, then whatever we say is no better than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

If we are filled up with strong faith but don't love others with agape love, then we are nothing.

If we are great at mission giving, but don't love with agape love, we gain nothing.

If we use our spiritual gifts without agape love, then the gifts we offer others, are nothing.

Paul speaks right into the midst of all that divided the Corinthian church,
and all that has ever divided God's people from each other,
which includes you and me

and says: this is what agape love looks like:

Agape love is patient; agape love is kind;
 agape love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
 Agape love does not insist on its own way;
 agape love is not irritable or resentful;
 agape love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
 Agape love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
 Agape love never ends.

So how do we love with this unconditional agape love? How do we let agape love be the love that leads us?

No matter how amazing each one of us is,
 we can't do this alone.

We can't use our will, our great big brains, our wanting to be kind,
 or our good hearts, to love with agape love all the time.

We need help. We need Jesus in our lives for us to love with Jesus' kind of love!
 We love with agape love, because Jesus loved us with agape love first.

So what does this look like and how do we do it? I found an amazing suggestion this week from Dr. John J. Pilch who writes about the cultural world that surrounded the Bible writers. It helped me look at this passage in a new way. He suggests that if we want to begin to understand agape love, and what Paul is calling us to in these verses, we should put Jesus' name into the verse every time we see the word love. You may have already noticed this on the cover of your bulletins

When we think about loving those people in our lives who are jealous, and boastful, arrogant and rude, irritable and resentful, who insist on their own way, we can look to Jesus for guidance to see how he loves the world.

Listen to verses four to seven with Jesus' name replacing the word agape love in the text:
 "Jesus is patient; Jesus is kind;
 Jesus is not envious
 or boastful or arrogant or rude.
 Jesus does not insist on his own way; Jesus is not irritable or resentful;
 Jesus does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
 Jesus bears all things,
 believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Pilch, John J., *The Cultural World of the Apostles, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C*,
 Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003, p. 32.

Another author puts it this way: "...if we love at all, we love because—when **we** were jealous and boastful, arrogant and rude, irritable and resentful and insisting upon our own way—the patient and kind God first loved us, is still loving our sorry selves (so that) ...we may one day see Love face to face!" (emphasis mine)

Connections, Ibid, p. 218

When Paul told the Corinthians that he would show them a "still more excellent way," the way of agape love, the literal language he used would have reminded them of being given directions for how to get over a high mountain pass. It was as though Paul had written at the end of chapter 12: "And continue in zeal for the highest spiritual gifts. And in addition, I will give directions for a journey over a mountain pass."

Bailey, Kenneth E., *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Cultural Studies in the Gospels*,
 Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008, p.350, 354.

This feels like a fitting image for the work of living the life of with agape love walking over a high mountain pass.

Jesus has walked before us,
leaving us footprints and a path to walk in.

The life of faith is like finding a high road through the mountains.

It takes work, it takes commitment, it takes faith, it takes love.

The good news for the journey is that we have been given all these things by Jesus,
who loved us first,

so that we know how to walk the path of agape love with courage and devotion.