



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“What’s Love Got to Do With It?”

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I Corinthians 13: 4-13

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The description of love that Mark read and spoke about is indeed often read during a wedding ceremony. These words are known to many, even those who have no particular connection to a church or have not come across these words in the bible. All you have to do is begin to quote it and people smile with a happy “ah yes!”

They are beautiful words, meant to affirm the love that brought the couple to that moment, the wedding vows. And as Mark noted- they can through the ordinary and extraordinary life of a marriage remind and deepen - or even challenge the couple in their ongoing relationship.

For these words are not about a sentimental feeling about love, but a call to active love that stretches us to reach beyond our own capacity toward God’s capacity. And while they are indeed beautiful and inspiring words for the intimate relationship that brings two people together in marriage, when Paul wrote this letter so long ago, he was writing to the scope of experience - for a community inspired and called together to be the Church- to be the living body of Christ active in the world. Imagine what that kind of love looks like! A people focused on, praying for, actively seeking always the good... of the other.

Our call to meditation frames this saying, “Loving is always risky, because we cannot enter into it without being changed. Altered. Transformed. In the face of this, we might well ask...Do we really desire to be so undone?” And that’s the challenge the author Paul has written, in the portion I read now from 1 Corinthians 13:1-13. Hear these words that precede that beautiful, challenging description of love:

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. 2 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. 3 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.

It is a call to action saying- Hey you can have the gift of speech, you can talk a good game, but it’s just noise...you can cherish wisdom and even think you can see more clearly than others,

you can claim a faith that can move mountains, you can even be a generous giver...but it is meaningless without love.

It is worth checking in with who Paul was writing these things to originally. He was not writing to a new budding church, or even an older established church - to congratulate them on how loving, patient, kind...they are. No he was critiquing and challenging these people who were the church in Corinth, "Have you been fundamentally changed, transformed...even undone by the immensity of God's love in your midst?" Apparently not, for it seems they are more wrapped up in pride, and competition for status...

These words about love were written to a church community in crisis – they were struggling with their identity as people called to be different than the culture that surrounded them. Paul has accused them of being filled with pride, boasting about themselves...seeming to be very sure of who they are as followers of Christ. They claim special knowledge and gifts but according to Paul they are a people who do not behave as if that means anything in the way they behave in their every day life. They are a people divided by competition and tension between themselves, even arguing about who they want to claim as the right or best leader.

Paul wrote letters like this one, either while he was traveling and planting churches, or spending time in prison because of the work he was doing.

It is hard to imagine there was any room or capacity for the kind of love that should bind them together when they were far too busy arguing about who is right, or which of them have the greatest gifts. One author wrote, "...true love is not measured by how good it makes us feel...it would be better to say that the measure of love is its capacity for tension and disagreement without division."

Ah, this is certainly a measure of love that would do us well in the climate of our world today. And we may, or may not, see ourselves in the view of the Corinthian church and the division they were struggling with...but I do find, when I am reading this letter and others that Paul wrote, that they sound like they could have been written today. And it is good to think about these things in our own lives.

So then, what is this love that Paul speaks of? It is an "agape" love, a definition of love that is much more about actions, or a way of being, than it is about romantic feelings for each other. In fact, what we read as a list of what love "is" and "is not" would be better translated as what love "does" and "does not" do. It is not only acting in a kind way, it is about embodying kindness...being kind. It is a love that cares and responds to the good of others. It is loving the other without agenda or an expectation that they must change or conform in order to be worthy. It is because of God's Spirit dwelling within us that we are able to see and love the other as God sees them. Fully worthy and beloved. It is the kind of love that we receive and know in the person and actions of Jesus.

So, are you challenged by a way of love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things?" Do you find it challenging to meet the everyday things of life; like slow people in the grocery line and rude drivers, or children, parents, bosses or employees that

would be so much easier to deal with if they would only...you fill in the blank. Do you always show patience and act with kindness when the clock is ticking and you need to get on with the next thing? I know I don't. But I also know I should, and that by each tiny moment of patience and every act of kindness the world becomes more of what it is meant to be. And, I am grateful, because if I am left to my own ability to love others in the way that I should, I will surely fail. But I know that God loves and knows me so completely, just as God loves and knows you so completely. And because this is true, I have faith that God is working in and through us to be the kind of love we are meant to be. And I believe, that indeed- love never ends...love wins.

So, we may have wonderful bible study and book groups, the best outreach and giving opportunities, we may have the most beautiful building and amazing gift of music here...all things to rejoice and be proud of but, unless we are steeped in the knowledge that we are, we exist because of God's great love, and that all we do is drawn from the Spirit of Love that changes, transforms, and challenges. Imagine being undone by the immensity of this love in action.

So often I am inspired by how I see this lived out in others. I returned from a week away at camp, so impressed by the people who volunteered their time to make this week happen. The staff of directors, counselors, and kitchen staff take this week (and more if you count all the prep time) to make themselves available to show God's love. They re-arrange their schedules, take a week off work, or work internships around this week. The group this year was the most other-focused, self-giving team I have encountered in my years involved with camp. Some shifted into roles they had not chosen, because that is where they were needed. There are women from our churches, that team up to staff the kitchen rearrange family and work schedules to be there. Can you imagine being a college student giving yourself over to this, without pay, because you just want these kids to experience something really good! They were patient and kind in active ways. There was no boasting or arrogance, no rudeness. Clearly they did not insist on their own way, but sought God's way. And even though it can become a long hot week in cabins, I saw no irritability or resentment. In terms of worship and the programs we offered, I saw them rejoice in truth. I am not kidding- I was inspired by them, I was a bit undone!!

Next Sunday we have the opportunity to hear from the people who went on the Hosanna work trip in Pennsylvania, and I hope what you will hear from them will both challenge and change you.

These are two current and particular situations our church has been involved with. These are tangible actions that take time and effort, and even sacrifice. And you might ask, "What's love got to do with it?" Why I believe, everything!

So, let us more and more, allow ourselves to be undone by God's love- and see what happens! Amen.