



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

From the Pulpit...

“The Face of Faith - Love”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

I Corinthians 12:12 – 13:7

September 14, 2025

I want to start, this morning, by sharing a bit of context. Headed into the summer months, last spring, I had an idea for sermon series in which members of the church would select passages that were especially important to them and share, in our Sunday services, what it was that drew them to that particular passage. The idea was that I would then base the theme and reflections of the wider service on that selection of Scripture. Unfortunately, after a handful of initial outreaches, it simply wasn't coming together, so I redirected things and focused in on the Beatitudes through the eyes of the Parables of Jesus, that we wrapped a few weeks ago.

One person who had quickly jumped on board, however, was Jon Butt. So, when Jon was set to be the lay reader for this morning, we returned to that original notion, which is why he shared a bit of his own thinking around that passage when he read it. What was interesting, however, was that his selection fit right in with this 'Face of Faith' series that was, at that point, just beginning to form in my heart and mind.

You may recall that the first eleven verses of I Corinthians 12 were part of our commissioning service as we kicked off the program year last week. In the first eleven verses of that chapter, Paul lays out the presence of varied gifts for God's service. 'To one is given the utterance of wisdom...to another gifts of healing...to another prophecy...' and so on. It's a fundamental reminder that each and every one of us has gifts meant to be used for the glory of God and the service of others. That was the heart of our considerations last week, that these things we do – the 'jobs' we take in the life and ministries of the church – are the manifestation of God's varied gifts within us that become the 'face' that we are putting on our faith to one another and to the world around us.

The challenge in the Corinthian Church, however, was that people had started to build something of a hierarchy of those gifts. In the Corinthian Church, some had begun to behave as though they were superior to others because of the particular spiritual gift they felt within themselves. That's what Paul is addressing in the rest of chapter 12 that Jon read for us. 'If the body were nothing but the eye, where would the hearing be? If the body were nothing but the ear, what about a sense of smell?' Paul's point, right in line with Jon's reflections, was that all gifts are important – that all gifts matter – and that each one is as imperative as the others to thriving of the body of Christ in this world. There is no hierarchy. There is none more indispensable than another. We are one in and of the same Spirit.

So, that's the twelfth chapter of I Corinthians in a nutshell – that we all have a variety of gifts, that the embracing and utilization of those gifts is the face that we put on this faith that we claim to hold, and that every one of us matters as much as the other in our shared endeavor to be the Body of Christ in this world. Throughout I Corinthians 12, Paul tells us to own, embrace and put to work those gifts that God has instilled within us, but then he goes on. 'Strive for the gifts,' Paul says, 'and I will show you a still more excellent way.' That's where those familiar words from I Corinthians 13 kick in.

If I speak in the tongues of humans 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.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (I Cor. 13: 1-7)

Now, many of you have heard me talk about these words before, so bear with me if this feels at all repetitive, but most of us know these words quite well from a particular context – from weddings. They are beautiful and poetic words that put a rich framework around the concept of love and, to be perfectly honest, serve as really good fodder for those of us trying to author reflections for wedding services. Those words preach at a weddings really well. The catch, of course, is that that's not what those words are about.

When we hear the word 'love,' there are a number of different connotations and applications for it. We love golf, or baseball, or coffee – and that means one thing. When we tell a friend we love them, it means another. The meaning is different again for family, and children, and carries a whole different sensibility with our spouses or partners. The one word can mean a lot of things in our lives, and the same is very much the case in Scripture. You know how the city of Philadelphia is often referred to as the 'city of brotherly love?' That's derived from the Greek word 'philia,' which is the Biblical word use for love among friends – among the community. Brotherly love. There's 'storge' love, which never actually shows up in that exact form in the Bible, but derivations of the word do, and it is a word that is centered on that familial dynamic of love. Then, of course, there's 'eros' love, which is that particular romantic love that we're leaning into at weddings. None of those, however, are what Paul is actually talking about in those words.

In the half-dozen times that Paul uses the word love in those seven verses, the word that is being translated is 'agape.' Many of you have likely heard that term before. It's a Biblical concept that gets a fair amount of attention in study Bibles and commentaries. In short, agape love is the love that humanity experiences in God and then reflects to one another. My old Harper Collins Dictionary of the Bible says that agape was used to 'designate the unmerited love God shows to humankind in sending his son as suffering redeemer. And, 'when used of human love, it means

selfless and self-giving love.’ Similarly, in shorter form, the Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms says that agape is ‘the self-giving love seen supremely in God’s love for the world and as a mark of the Christian life.’ Said my way, again, agape love is the love that humanity experiences in God and then reflects to one another. That’s what Paul is talking about here.

Each time Paul uses the word love in these seven verses, Paul is talking about our reflection of God’s love, as we know it, to the world around us. So, humor me, if you will, and allow me to share these words from Paul with a few of my own edits.

‘If I speak not only as a mere human, but with truth that could come only from God, but those words aren’t surrounded by the spirit of God’s selfless love living through me, I’m just noise.

If I have the ability to help this world embrace the glories and wonders that are the mysteries of God – and if I have a trust in God so strong that seems I could move the very earth on which we stand – but the moves I make aren’t spreading to others the sacrificial love that God has shared with me, it’s worthless.

If I do all those things that make me look like a person of righteous faith, but I’m not giving of myself to others as God has given of himself to me, I’ve fallen short.

Reflecting God’s love to the world means waiting with patience. Reflecting God’s love to the world living in kindness. Reflecting God’s love to the world means letting go of envy and boastfulness, and arrogance. Reflecting God’s love to the world means accepting others as they are and not how we want them to be, forgiving, forbearing, trusting, hoping, enduring, and so much more.’

Now, there’s a lot of artistic and interpretive license there, but I think it’s true to the point. That’s the love that Paul is describing here and, perhaps more to the point, that is what Paul says is the ‘still more excellent way.’ After eleven verses that open up chapter twelve speaking about the variety of ways in which God’s Spirit has instilled gifts within each of us, and then the rest of that chapter explaining how each and every one of those gifts matter to us, to the body of Christ, and to world around us, Paul goes on to say that each and every one of those beloved, celebrated, wondrous gifts that God has instilled within us are only good insofar as we are using those gifts to reflect the self-giving and sacrificial love of God to the world around us.

What I kicked off last week was this still-forming fall series on the face that we put on faith in our lives. There are a number of different aspects and considerations of such a thing that we will look towards in the weeks to come. That said, what compelled me about Jon’s selection of I Corinthians 12 and 13, however, is that they serve as a fundamental reminder that the base expectation for each and every face of faith that we express to this world is that it must start, end, and remain throughout, a reflection of God’s self-giving and sacrificial love shown to us in Jesus, the Christ. Said another way, every gift must lead with love – God’s agape love. And, anything short of that fails to meet the call God has laid before with those gifts we’ve been given.