

“Agape Love”  
May 3, 2020  
St. Paul’s UCC Church  
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**1 Corinthians 13:1-13**

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. 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. 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.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a 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. For now we see in a glass, darkly, but then we will see face to face. 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.

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If you’ve ever been to a wedding in your life – just one wedding – chances are, you’ve heard these words from 1 Corinthians. “Love is patient. Love is kind.” They are beautiful words, and I get why we hear them so much at weddings. Weddings are beautiful. And romantic. Weddings are all about love.

But we sure do throw the word “love” around a lot. I know I do. I use it – overuse it – all the time. We make love empty – a feeling, really, and nothing more. The word slips through our lips so casually: “I love chocolate. I love cats. I *love* your hair.” We make love trivial. Or we reduce it sentimental romance, to warm fuzzy feelings and goose bumps and not much more.

But, as you will see, there’s “love,” and there’s...*love*. In our passage for today from 1 Corinthians, Paul is talking about the latter.

Back in 1960, C.S. Lewis published a little book called *The Four Loves*. The book is based on one insight: Greek – the language of the Apostle Paul – Greek has four

different words that are translated into English as “love:” *storge*, *philos*, *eros*, and *agape*. And these four different words have four different meanings.

When Paul writes about love in 1 Corinthians 13, he isn’t talking about *storge* love – that’s the love we have for familiar things, like your favorite meal or an old recliner. And when Paul writes about love in 1 Corinthians 13, he isn’t talking about *philos*. That’s friendship, the love you have for best buds. And when Paul tells the Corinthians about love, he isn’t even talking about *eros*, which is romantic love, the love of soft light, slow dances, and romantic weddings.

No, beloved, Paul says the greatest of these is...*agape*. C.S. Lewis called it the highest of the four loves, the love God has for us, the love God calls us to have for one another, our neighbor, our world. It’s love that seeks nothing in return; a love that wants nothing but the best for the beloved. It’s less about *feeling* and more about *doing*. It’s the way that God loves us; the way that we are called to love one another.

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And it’s *this* love, this *agape* love, that Paul is talking about when he writes to the Corinthians in today’s passage.

You see, Paul isn’t writing to two people gazing star-ily into each other’s eyes at some altar somewhere when he talks about love. Quite the opposite, in fact. Here, Paul speaks about the power of love to a community that seems to be *totally lacking in it*.

Something you need to know about the people to whom Paul is writing: they are in conflict. He’s writing to a church in conflict. Hard to imagine, I know! The Corinthians were a diverse group; and unfortunately, more often than not, their diversity dissolved into discord and rivalry. Members fractured into contentious groups. They took sides. They had *opinions*. The Corinthian Church was a church divided.

Also, the Corinthian Church was a church kind of in the dark about things. They had been told Christ was coming back, but they didn’t know when, and they weren’t getting any younger. In the meantime, persecutions of Christians were still common; they could be arrested, or fined, or even put to death because of their beliefs. So not only were these early Christians not getting along with each other, they didn’t know what the future held for them. They just didn’t know. You could almost say that they were looking through a glass, darkly.

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But that’s life, isn’t it? It’s amazing how much we don’t know. It’s amazing how dark things can be.

We don’t know the future: what’s in store for our children, our families, our loved ones. We don’t know what’s going to happen with the coronavirus. We don’t know *why* we are having to face this awful pandemic. We don’t know why bad things happen to us in general. We don’t know why some people die too soon. We don’t know why there is

pain, and suffering. There is so much we don't know. So much to be afraid of. So much to be anxious about. Sometimes it seems to me that life is all about the long and anxious work of looking through a glass, darkly.

So... what do we do in the meantime, this in-between time, when we don't even know what we don't know?

We love. That's what Paul tells the Corinthians; that's what Paul tells us.

Remember: I'm not talking about a mushy, sentimental love here. I'm talking about the real deal: agape love. Remember: Paul's "poetic ode to love" in 1 Corinthians was not written to celebrate the beautiful feelings already present in the community. Not at all. His words are a call to action. His words are an intervention, an alarm bell, clamoring and calling us to find another way.

You know that argument that you really want to win? Let it go. You know that one thing you did or said that's still haunting you – even though the other person was wrong too? Say you're sorry. You know that guy with the politics that drives you absolutely insane? Pray for him. Remember that person who really, really hurt you? Pray to be able to forgive them. You know how you keep saying yes to things, when you're so tired, and really don't have time for all this, but you don't want to disappoint people? Start saying no. You know how you keep beating up on yourself, thinking you're no good? Imagine God's light all around you, holding you like the beautiful child you are.

We see through a glass, darkly. There is so much that we don't know. But in the meantime, we can love. We can love each other, as messy and as hard it can be. Maybe we can even learn to love ourselves. It's difficult work, demanding work. We can't do it alone. But together? Maybe that will work. Maybe we can help each other learn to love. Maybe together, we can become a little more like God.

Thanks be to God.