

EASTER 6 (1 Corinthians 13:1-13)

Love Like God

The reading from the first letter to the Corinthians is deservedly one of the most well-known passages in the New Testament. Today, we are most likely to encounter these familiar words in the context of a wedding service, celebrating the physical, emotional, and spiritual bond of love between two people. As a result, the love named in this passage is all too often reinterpreted primarily as a private, intimate affection unifying two individuals for a lifelong journey of matrimonial fidelity. The last verse is practically an anthem of Christian weddings in the western world: “There are three things that will endure - faith, hope, and love - and the greatest of these is love.”

It is offered when all is truly well and fellowship is working its greatest work: two lives, two families are uniting. It is recited as wedding vows or offered as a poetic moment. It is engraved on wedding rings; framed and hung on the wall; embroidered on pillows. There is no question that this passage has much to say about marriage and the habits, practices, and dispositions that nurture and sustain such commitments. However, this passage is incorrectly understood and misinterpreted, as praising the value of romantic, human love. What is often missed, and perhaps actively ignored, is that this passage was first written to a community that was having a very difficult time staying together.

Given that reality and our deep familiarity with the content of these verses, it is important to gain a clear understanding of the place of this letter within the argument of the epistle as a whole. From the beginning of this letter, Paul has demonstrated a deep concern over divisions within the Corinthian church. Some of these divisions stem from groups

that adhere to specific apostles. Some divisions arise from disagreements about how to negotiate various aspects of pagan life in Corinth. In all these cases, Paul makes it clear that there should be no divisions among the Corinthians.

Paul specifically writes this chapter in response to this particular situation. He declares love as the greatest power in a community that seems to be lacking a lot of it. This love is not about an adoring couple standing at the altar declaring unwavering devotion to each other. The members of the Corinthian church, whom Paul is addressing, are nowhere near a love-fest.

Paul wedges this ode to love in the middle of his discussion about spiritual gifts. The discussion is found in the chapters preceding and following the love chapter. In the previous chapter, Paul presents his famed analogy of the Church as the body of Christ. This body boasts many gifts and many stations unified under one banner. Yet, these many giftings and functions are not enough to sustain the community. Paul digresses here to talk about love as the hidden ingredient, only to resume his discussion of the spiritual life in the following chapter. Here, he connects love and spiritual gifts to each other saying, “Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts ... ”

Unlike the marriage vow moment, Paul does not introduce this passage to affirm an ethic already present in the community. He presents this passage as a way to introduce into the community an ethic that is necessary if they are to survive the muddy waters of difference and disagreement produced in interpersonal relationships.

Continuity is a central thread through Paul's argument. Gifts of the Holy Spirit: tongues, prophecy, wisdom and knowledge ought to equip the people of God to embody Christ's resurrection life in the present. However, the Corinthians have been wielding these 'gifts' against one another to devastating effect. By contrast, Paul's vision of a cruciform Body, that is a body constituted by multiple members exercising diverse gifts, re-calibrates the status of these spiritual disciplines.

Paul maintains that the 'body politics' of the church cannot be re-coded upon racial tensions (Jew or Greek) or economic hierarchies (slave or free) or social mechanisms of honour and shame. For these have been overcome in Christ as a matter of fundamental identity: 'God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.'

Paul doesn't mince his words: 'You Corinthians are the body of Christ and individually members of it.' If that is the foundation of Christian identity, what then does continuity look like in concrete, visible reality? What, in Paul's language, is the 'more excellent way.'

The Corinthian Church was not a homogenous body. Its members were not all of the same kind and ilk. This was not a comfortable gathering where people fell into step with each other because they shared fundamentally similar lives, values, and experiences. Quite the contrary.

The Corinthian fellowship or koinonia, transgressed conventional social boundaries of ethnicity, gender, age, rank, status, and life situation. There are married and unmarried men and women, as well as widows

and children among them. While most of its members are converted Gentiles, this body also includes Jews. In fact, some of these Jewish members were rather powerful figures who served as former synagogue leaders, like Crispus and Sosthenes.

Most of its members were from the lower classes, but some sat on the opposite side in rank and resources. Erastus, for example, was the city treasurer of Corinth, and Gaius had enough resources to support Paul and the whole church. There are slaves and free people in the community as well as people with different skill sets and gifts.

The diversity within the church of Corinth generated both benefits and challenges common for any social group. Unfortunately, the diversity among the Corinthians dissolved into discord and rivalry. Members divided into contentious groups. They took sides, with some saying they are followers of one teacher or another. This was a community fragmented, rather than enriched, by difference.

Yet, Paul remains firm that this diversity is nonnegotiable. God has called this community to be diverse and to get along within it. Paul's "poetic ode to love" was not written to celebrate the unifying love already accomplished in the community. It was a call to action. It was not a tribute to what is. It was an intervention to instruct on what had not yet come to pass.

Paul did not intend the language of 1st Corinthians to be easily digested. The point was not to make its readers feel comfortable and affirmed in love. The point was to create cognitive dissonance. Although aesthetically beautiful, the ode is meant to motivate a new action plan

among the members that secures the community's survival and concord into the future.

In his tribute to love, Paul starts out by naming human achievement as temporal and limited. Up until this point in the letter, much of Paul's discussion about speaking in tongues, prophesy, knowledge, and insight has affirmed these as ingredients of Christian worship and life. Paul spills an enormous amount of ink describing these achievements and stations as necessary and desirable. There may be nothing wrong with such things in themselves, but if, in the process, people forget about loving their brothers and sisters, such things end up being worthless. Without love, it does not matter what budgets, buildings, or mission strategies we have. Such things do not give the church the shape that God desires. We may pursue various forms of Spirituality, or proper doctrine, or activism in the name of justice. However, in our pursuit of these otherwise fine things, we must not forget that the church is called to be a community that practices love.

Love - divine agape - is for Paul, nothing less than the ultimate reality, the deepest meaning, the perfect and perfecting telos, goal, or end in which human beings discover their true selves before God and with one another. Paul considers love as the leading characteristic of the 'fruit of the spirit. It fulfils the law;' knits together every ligament of the body and binds all things together in perfect unity. To live in love is to live in the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

"Love" happens in every phrase Paul writes. In the English translation, which is not the best, love is described by some rather static adjectives. "Love is patient, love is kind." In the original Greek, more accurately,

Paul's claims are that love "shows patience" and "acts with kindness." Here, love is a busy, active thing that never ceases to work. It is always finding ways to express itself for the good of others. The point is not a flowery description of what love "is" in some abstract and theoretical sense, but of what love *does*, and especially what love does to one's brother or sister in the church. In Old Testament words, this is "hesed," or loving kindness, which is always an action word, not a feeling good word. Paul never says that such love feels good, and this is where the typical use of this chapter goes off the rails.

Such misunderstanding creates trouble not only for expectations regarding the day-to-day realities of marriage, but also for the realities of the church. Because of our disordered assumptions about what love actually is, we often act as though the mission of the church is to gather like-minded and likeable people together. We think that in such a community it will be easy for us to love, or, more honestly, to "feel the love." But true love is not measured by how good it makes us feel. In the context of 1 Corinthians, it would be better to say that the measure of love is its capacity for tension and disagreement without division.

Paul certainly expects that this love will be lived out by the church; that's the whole purpose of this chapter. There is good news here. "All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God knows me now," affirms that we have already been fully known by God. We are not simply left to our own capacity for love. We can love because God has already fully known us and loved us anyway, and is working to make our lives and our communities look more and more like this busy, active, tireless love.

Accordingly, Paul underscores the primacy of love in 1 Corinthians because it is the spiritual resource the Corinthians lack most. Paul describes “the work of love” in both positive and negative terms. On the positive side, using the Greek translation, Paul says love shows patience and acts with kindness. It involves truth-telling, fortitude, constancy, and tolerance.

In terms of what love “is not,” Paul says it is not self-seeking, short-tempered, and offensive. In other words, love does not hurt people. It does not damage prospects for authentic community. Love does not impede affirmation of another’s humanity. Love is the only means by which believers have a chance to live fully in the knowledge and fellowship of God. All other spiritual gifts and human achievements provide limited access to that reality.

The love Paul is talking about here is not passive and fluffy. This kind of love is an up at dawn, feet on the ground, tools in hand, working kind of love. It builds communities. It nurtures positive social interactions, and not just social networks (which many of us have come to prefer). Paul’s declaration of love unifies. Love is the way by which we talk to each other, eat with one another, fellowship together, and affirm all. Love transcends our self-imposed caste systems and personal biases. It forms whole and holistic people, who are anchored in the well-being of others. Love will not let us down if we genuinely live in it together.

What but the love of God, could hold a community constituted by radically subversive difference? What but love could heal the wounds of racial segregation and social alienation between Jew and Gentile, Israelite and Palestinian? What but love could form solidarity with

suffering, compassion toward enemies, honouring the forgotten ones by sitting at the feet of the least of these?

A group of seminary professors and students were on a tour of the Holy Land. Upon their arrival, in the span of twenty minutes, they heard both church bells and the Muslim call to prayer. This is a land where divisions are alive and thriving - racial, denominational, and political. One of the professors noted that, sometimes we forget just how divisive the gospel can be.

Choosing regard over rejection, respect over malice, love over hate, peace over conflict is not as easy as we hope it could be, as we have seen, or as we wish it would be. It seems like it should be easy - and that's the problem. Why is it that we find it so difficult to make what appears to be a rather obvious choice? A choice for love? What stands in our way? What is at stake for us that we are reluctant to admit or to say out loud?

On their trip, the group had a presentation by Parents' Circle, a grassroots organization for Palestinians and Israelis who have lost loved ones due to the conflict. The representatives who spoke to the group were two fathers, a Palestinian and an Israeli, who had both lost daughters because of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. They had a very honest discussion about the conflict and about life before and after the Separation Wall. "No wall, no matter how high, can stop two kinds of people; one determined suicide bomber, and the other a determined peacemaker," said one of the fathers. They each went through their own moments of wondering how life could possibly carry on given the death of their children due to such senseless, mindless

fighting. They could have chosen revenge to ease their pain but instead realized that the only way forward was to talk to each other.

In each other, they found the way to carry on because, in their words, “our blood is the same colour, our tears are just as bitter.” They found a way to carry on that chose peace instead of revenge, conversation instead of fear, life instead of death because “it is not our destiny to kill each other in this Holy Land.” At stake for both fathers was peace. Simple as that. This the gospel. This is love.

A couple of years ago, I read a book called “I shall Not Hate” by Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish. It’s a Gaza doctor’s journey through chaos. His wife, three daughters and niece were killed by an Israeli attack, a bomb in their homes. He is now working at Sick Children’s Hospital in Toronto. He writes: “If I could know that my daughters were the last sacrifice on the road to peace between Palestinians and Israelis, then I would accept their loss.” In his dedication he writes: “To children everywhere. Their only weapons are love and hope.”

No matter where we go, or who we are, there is and will be disagreement and division. The answer is not to erase, pretend it doesn’t exist, or think it will eventually go away, but to embrace more fully how to live into it, among it, and with it in love – because God is love.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE FOR EASTER 6 - MAY 5, 2024

You are free, Lord, your Ascension has set you free: free from the constraints of human existence, outside the limitations of time and space; free to be here with us now, in our worship and fellowship; and free to be with us always; for in your freedom, you have bound yourself to us with a promise: "Lo! I am with you always even to the very end of time."

By the power and guidance of your Holy Spirit, O God, may our prayers never be empty words but an urgent response to your living Word - in non-violent direct action for positive change, in bold, clear, specific acts of solidarity, liberations, healing and compassion, readily sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Open our hearts to love and to see that all people are made in your image, to care for Creation and affirm life in all its wondrous diversity. Transform us in the offering of ourselves so that we may be your partners in transformation to strive for the full, visible unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ, to become neighbours to all, as we await with eager longing the full revelation of your rule in the coming of a new heaven and a new earth.

God of justice; you break down the barriers that prohibit us from reaching out in love to all of God's children. Move us beyond economic, racial, gender and class distinctions in our service with and for those in need.

Creator God, we marvel in awe of the expansiveness of your Creation. Your margins of diversity are boundless, and for that, we thank you. Each of our beloved 2SLGBTQIA+ siblings, and all who identify as colored, black or of mixed race or ethnicity, are beautifully and wonderfully made, all in Your image. Teach us to love people, just as they are, and embrace their identity fully, as you have embraced us.

We pray for the families of the many missing indigenous women and girls and two-spirited persons across our nation: For the beautiful Indigenous girls whose lives were cruelly shortened; For the beautiful Indigenous women who were robbed of their potential; For the beautiful two-spirited people who were targeted because of bigotry. We pray for families whose search for their loved one continues, awaiting any word of hope that their loved one is found and alive, and for those families grieving the loss of a loved one, a mother, sister auntie, cousin, sibling, neighbour or friend. Hold their tears closely, and comfort them with your abiding presence.

We pray for our congregations and their leaders, bishops, pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders and musicians: Bishops Linda, Susan, Anna and Kathy; Church of the Cross and Pastors Lyle McKenzie and Lyndon Sayers, for all prison chaplains and their ministries.

We pray for our country and for its people: for our indigenous brothers and sisters living on reserve and in urban centres; for our government leaders, federal, provincial and municipal; for our judicial system, police and armed forces; for our cities, towns, and rural communities; for employers and employees, for young and old, for immigrants and refugees; For all who make up this great country.

We pray for those caught in war torn regions of the world, and places where violence, crime and hatred oppress, especially the innocent victims of these evils. We pray for the people of Ukraine, the people of Israel and Gaza, the people of Sudan, and the lives lost, the destruction of homes and communities as refugees flee seeking safety following months, and even years, of conflict.

We pray for the communities and people in Brazil and Kenya whose lives and livelihoods have recently been gravely impacted by severe flooding and mudslides. We pray that emergency aid, including water and food, and other provisions be made available to assist with the hard work ahead of rebuilding communities and restoring essential basic necessities to support lives. Comfort those grieving the loss of loved ones.

We pray for those whose Easter joy has been disrupted by unexpected events in their lives. We pray for Pastor Kristen Steele, her family, and Shepherd of the Valley congregation as they face the unexpected diagnosis of cancer. Support her through her treatments ahead. We pray for pastor Vida as her family faces difficult and challenging times.

We pray for all people in their daily life and work—for our families, friends, and neighbours, and for those who are alone. We name before you individuals and families experiencing personal hardship, living through difficult circumstances, adjusting to unwelcome news in their lives, or facing an uncertain future. We pray for the homeless, those experiencing inadequate or insecure housing, or facing renoviction; those suffering from the effects of substance abuse, those living with mental illness, and those who are separated from loved ones. Hear us Lord as we now lift up those people and those situations you have placed upon our hearts ...

Compassionate God, help us to listen closely to your Word, even as you listen closely to our prayers. As we live in the grace of being Easter people, knowing we are saved and cherished, we pray for your whole world. Guide us in the path of discipleship, so that, as you have blessed us, we may also be a blessing to others, bringing the promise of your kin-dom near through our words and deeds.

Amen

God in Community, Holy in One, make us one Body from many individuals, as we pray as Jesus taught us, saying,

Our Father ...