

“THE HEART OF IT ALL”
(1 Corinthians 13:1-13)
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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 7-11-10]

-I-

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read NRSV Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 and Pray.
2. We as human beings and as human culture have been, – an always will be – infatuated by the concepts and ideals of LOVE.

A–A good portion of our literature and entertainment deals with it – I mean, where would we be without the stories of “Romeo and Juliet,” “Gone with the Wind,” and even fairy tales like Snow White, Cinderella, and Beauty and the Beast?

B–And if you think about it, most of the music of our culture even tends to deal primarily with love in human relationships: love between a man and a woman; the heartache that comes from broken relationships; and even the search for true love.

C–You see, LOVE is a central and foundational theme for all of human existence that everyone can relate to.

D–Remember a few years ago that even Forest Gump explained [ACT OUT *in character*]... “*I’m not a smart man, but I know what love is....*” Well, he may have. But do WE *really*?

3. I mean, what IS love? And what role does it play in our lives of faith as Christians? Well, today’s scriptures addresses that... [Contemp. Service ONLY: Let me read it for us... (Read MSG Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13)] [*Read Bulletin Sermon Notes...*]

-II-

4. Let’s start by looking at what we mean by “love,” as understood in the Bible.

A–You know, part of our confusion today over the concept and practice of “love” is that while we use one word in English, there were at least four different Greek words used in biblical times:
 - 1–There was *storgé*, which referred to loving your family and kin.
 - 2–There was *philia* (*phileo*), which is sometimes translated as “brotherly love” (= Gk. *philadelphia*), and it refers to friendship and fondness for someone or something (such as *liking / loving* ice cream, or your dog, or your friend).
 - 3–And there was also the Greek word *eros*, which we often think means sexual desire (e.g., the English word “erotic”), but which literally refers merely to one’s desire for something you don’t possess = it’s selfish desire; a desire for our own well-being.
 - 4– The problem is that neither *storgé* nor *eros* appear anywhere in the Bible, and *philia* only appears 6 times.

B–Instead, the word that appears over 150 times which we translate as “love” (or sometimes as “charity”) is the Greek word *agape*, which in that language really refers to *unselfish, benevolent concern for the well-being of another*.

1–It’s NOT mere feeling, and NOT just being nice to those who are nice to you.

2–Rather, it’s self-giving and self-sacrificing for the good of another – love which puts the needs and desires of others *first* – even *before* one’s own needs & desires.

3–It’s an attitude / perspective on life which gives and expects nothing in return – which loves even the most unlovely and most unlovable, loving even those who don’t love *you* in return.

C–Now obviously, this is NOT a kind of love which comes naturally or easily for anyone!

1–Even the famous GA Methodist pastor Cecil Myers once said, “*I’ve never met a person I couldn’t love, but I’ve had some close calls.*” ¹

2–Well, God doesn’t expect us to possess or generate this kind of love on our own.

3–Instead, He gives us His grace and power through the Holy Spirit to *grow* this “spiritual fruit” of *agape* love in our hearts as we walk daily with Him. ²

–III–

5. But, in the words that rock-star Tina Turner once asked, “*What’s love got to do with it?*” ³

A–I mean, what *DOES agape* love have to do with anything in our lives of faith? After all, if we just believe all the right things and attend church every so often, isn’t that enough?

B–Well, today’s scripture seems to indicate otherwise. Look at Verses 1-3, where we find Paul telling the Corinthian Christians:

[MSG] “*If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don’t love, I’m nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God’s Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain ‘Jump’ and it jumps, but I don’t love, I’m nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don’t love, I’ve gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love.*”

[NRSV] “*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.*”

C–Now, I noticed that we have a tendency to read this “Love Chapter” (as it’s come to be called) as if it’s in a vacuum – without a context at all.

1–But we need to understand that when Paul wrote these verses about the importance of *agape* love, he was doing so because they were deeply divided over a variety of issues, foremost of which was confusion over the proper understanding and use of various spiritual gifts.

2–In Chapters 12 and 14, Paul explicitly addresses the misuse and abuse of these, but notice that today’s scripture (Chapter 13) is stuck right smack in the middle.

3–It’s almost as if, by Ch.13's very *placement*, Paul wants to tell these Corinthians: “*Look folks, agape love needs to be at the very heart of this matter that you are disagreeing about. You don’t all have to agree with each other, but you should all love each other, even through your disagreement.*”

4–In other words, he was saying that love should be the “meat” of the sandwich (for which the gifts of the Spirit were merely the “bread”).

D–He was saying that *agape* love should be the distinguishing mark/characteristic of all who claim to follow God – that’s it’s the “Heart of It All” when it comes to Christian faith. ⁴

6. The unfortunate reality, though, is that there are many of us as Christians who are so caught up in having to have all the “correct/right” beliefs about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Bible or the church that we don’t know how to *practice LOVE* as we hold our beliefs.

A–We often seem more concerned with “doctrinal purity” (which IS important) than with “loving our neighbor” – ...

1–...More concerned with demanding “social justice” (which also IS important) than with doing it in ways that model “loving God with all our heart, soul and mind”

2–We’re often more concerned with having all the “right / biblical” answers to every “hot topic” issue of our day (like homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, gun-control) than we are about *loving* those who may hold a view opposite our own.

3–You see, in my experience, far too many of us as Christians are preoccupied with getting *our* views heard and adopted, instead of valuing a *process* of love which *shares together* and *learns from* views which WE may not always agree with!

B–And yet, today’s scripture (among others) tells us that no matter how “correct” and “right” we think we are in our beliefs, if we don’t *consistently* conduct ourselves in and with and through *agape* LOVE, then we’re just fooling ourselves pretending to be Christians!

1–Now, notice I said “consistently conduct ourselves by love.” You know, even the most spiritually *mature* Christians slip-up on occasion – at times they say or do things that perhaps don’t exemplify the high ideals of Christian love (*I do this at times, even as your pastor!*).

2–And yet, authentic Christianity doesn’t mean we don’t ever make mistakes – it simply means that we won’t have a *continual, repeated pattern* of this.

3–So don't judge your sisters or brothers too quickly or too harshly when they falter every now and again, but instead look for what the *pattern* is in their lives.

4–Jesus says in Matthew 7 (Vss. 15-20), “*You shall know [true Christians] by their fruit*” – and *agape* “love” is, of course, the greatest “fruit” of all.

–IV–

7. You see, my whole point today is that the quality and the practice and of *agape* love is at the very HEART of all we say and all we do as Christians.

A–Agape Love is to inform what we BELIEVE, mold what we SAY, motivate what we DO, and to shape who we ARE.

B–In many ways, the characteristics of *agape* love described in today's scripture are really like a mirror or plumb-line for self-examination for those who profess Christ.

8. So as we close, I want to give us a “Love Test” – on the screen you'll see the words to THE MESSAGE version of Verses 4-7 again, with a blank substituted for every original instance of the word “love.”

A–So, I want us to read these again together, except [everywhere you see a blank, I want you to say *your first name* out loud.

B–And as you read, honestly ask yourself, “*Does this description really fit me? And if not, then what do I need to do to better develop this aspect of agape love in my life?*”
[Words on the media screen, with blanks for people's first names...]

“_____ never gives up. _____ cares more for others than for self. _____ doesn't want what _____ doesn't have. _____ doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, and doesn't force him/herself on others. _____ isn't always 'Me First!' _____ doesn't fly off the handle, or keep score of the sins of others. _____ doesn't revel when others grovel, but takes pleasure in the flowering of truth. _____ puts up with everything, trusts God always, and always looks for the best. _____ never looks back, but keeps going to the end. The love of _____ for God and others never dies.”⁵

C–Now, if you're like me, you probably don't always live up to these characteristics. But the goal is for us to continue to work on it, with the help of God's Holy Spirit.

D–After all, LOVE is “The Heart of It All” when it comes to our Christian faith!

9. [CLOSING PRAYER...]

ENDNOTES:

1. Shared in a sermon by retired North Georgia United Methodist pastor Rev. Gary Parrish in Fall 1994.
2. Note that “love” is the first of the “fruit of the Spirit” Paul mentions in Galatians 5:22, highlighting its priority and importance in the life of a Christian.
3. From the title of one of her #1 hit songs from 1984.
4. As evidence of this importance and priority of love, In Mark 12:30-31 we find Jesus himself telling a lawyer that the greatest commandment is to “...*love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.... [and to] love your neighbor as yourself... [and that there is] no commandment greater than these.*”
 And, in fact, Christian history bore this out in terms of what Christians were known by. For example, the unbelieving Greek writer Lucian (living in the 2nd-century AD) noticed how love seemed to be the hallmark of the early Christians. He once wrote that “*It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator [Jesus] has put it in their heads that they are brothers [and sisters].*” In the same century, the famous Christian apologist Tertullian wrote that “*It is our care for the helpless, our practice of lovingkindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. 'Look!' they say, 'How they love one another! Look how they are prepared to die for one another!'*”
5. The NRSV translation of Verses 4-7 reads as follows: “_____ is patient; _____ is kind; _____ is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. _____ does not insist on his or her own way; _____ is not irritable or resentful; _____ does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. _____ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. _____’s love never ends.”