

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

February 3, 2019  
*4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

### **Is Love All We Need?**

If Beethoven is famous for writing an “Ode to Joy,” Paul is even more well-known for writing this “Hymn to Love.”

Songs about love have always been popular. For the most part, such songs are about romantic love and its mysteries. But in the 1960s, when “peace, love, and music” converged for a cultural moment in time, some pop songs reflected on Love with a capital “L,” love which is bigger and more powerful than the relationship between two people, as powerful as that can be. The 1965 song by Hal David proclaimed, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love, it’s the only thing that there’s just too little of.” Since it’s been covered by more than 100 artists since then, I’m hopeful that generations younger than I will recognize it. And then there were the Beatles, who in 1967 gave the “Summer of Love” a theme song: “All You Need is Love.” (Dah-dah-da-da-da!) We could probably all sing that one if we wanted to!

But is it true? Is this what Paul is telling us in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians?

In these next few weeks, we will be diving deep into this most-famous “hymn to love,” unpacking its message for all of us. We started exploring the Bible’s teachings on love back in September when we committed to the theme of “learning and living God’s love, together.” It’s taken until now for us to reach the Bible’s best-known exposition of love. And—spoiler alert--because it’s so rich, we plan to spend the month of February immersed in it. (I know, it’s a little bit corny, to devote February to Love, but that’s what we’re doing.)

Love. How often we have heard this chapter read at weddings. It’s known and loved by people who may have little or no knowledge of its context or original intent. It’s even used in secular weddings because it conveniently does not mention the name of God, or Christ. So our first step is to unlearn any associations we might have between these verses and rented tuxedos, flower girls, or unity candles. It is more than an accessory to the perfect wedding.

It has a backstory, which can be found in the first twelve chapters of 1 Corinthians. Paul wrote this letter to a real congregation which had real problems. There were disputes over leadership, over who had the best spiritual credentials for teaching this new faith. There were controversies over moral standards, whether it mattered that church members were openly living in sexually immoral relationships, still practicing idolatry, and drinking to excess. There were conflicts about lawsuits among believers, about eating food which had been dedicated to idols, about who should wear head coverings or not, and about appropriate behavior when observing the Lord’s supper. And leading up to this chapter, there were arguments about the spiritual gifts which various members were displaying. Some were very proud of their gifts, and thought their particular gifts should give them a place of privilege and honor in the community.

It’s as if Paul is blowing the whistle at recess, and shouting, “STOP!” All this fighting, all this arrogance, all this noise is the opposite of what a community rooted in Christ should be doing. The first six verses of chapter thirteen are a direct response to the behavior of the Corinthian church. They are

not acting like a Christian church should act. They've forgotten what brought them together, and they've lost sight of where they are headed, so they aren't on the right path to get there.

This famous chapter is not about the feeling of love, the emotion. It's about the doing of love, the action, how love is lived. And it's especially powerful because it's not sentimental at all. It is reality-based, down-to-earth wisdom. And it's rooted in a profound knowledge of who God is, as we can know God in Christ.

This chapter reminds the Corinthians, and it reminds us, that love is our starting place, because God is love. We come from love. It counsels the Corinthians, and it counsels us, that love is our way, because love is Christ's way. Christ and Christ's people walk in love. It points the Corinthians, and it points us, to our eternal destination in God, the unity God desires for us and for which God made us. God's love is our goal. Love is the way, the truth, and the life. It is our foundation, our guiding principle, and our purpose. Love is the gift we have received from God in Christ, to which all other gifts are subsidiary.

And with that, Paul settles the arguments in the Corinthian church which have come to resemble the fights on a school playground. It doesn't matter that you have the spiritual gift of tongues if you are just using it to lord it over others—that's just noise. It doesn't matter if you have an amazing grasp of scripture and can quote all the finest theologians—if you've forgotten the lesson on love, you've forgotten the most important lesson of all. It doesn't matter if you give sacrificially of your time, talents, and treasures if you do so merely to impress people, or show off to God. The only motivation that matters is love. And

- Love is patient—and does not grow weary despite the foibles of others.
- Love is kind—exhibiting the mercy and affection God shows to us in Christ.
- Love is not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude—even though these bad manners attract a lot of attention these days! They are the opposite of love, and the opposite of living like Christ.
- Love does not insist on its own way. Oh, my friends, there's a verse I hope our political leaders would hear and heed!
- Love is not irritable or resentful—Even when the community is irritating and does hurtful things, the person guided by love does not react with the same.
- Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. There is no “ends justifying the means” rationale in Christian ethics, because honesty and integrity are the plumb line which align our speech and actions to God's way.

In Christ-like love, there is humility and grace. These are the values by which Christ's followers are called to live. It doesn't matter how large or small the church or community of faith. It can be a community of two, a Christian marriage, where the demands of love are planted and nurtured. Or it can be a congregation of thousands. What's most important is that the principles of love are taught and practiced.

And there's no question in my mind that the world needs love, now. A survey of 20,000 Americans showed that almost half report feeling alone, left out, and isolated. This epidemic of

loneliness leads to physical and mental health problems, negative work outcomes, and reduction in both reasoning abilities and creativity. (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/modern-mentality/201807/what-you-need-know-about-the-loneliness-epidemic>) Well, God knew this in the Garden of Eden story when he said, "It is not good that Adam, the human one, should be alone." Human beings are social beings. We need community, and love is the strongest power there is binding any community together. We're made for love, and to love. We may have 4000 friends on Facebook, or 40,000 followers on Instagram, or 40 million people reading our tweets, but without love, we are nothing. Love is the greatest gift of all, and the antidote to loneliness.

That's why Jesus told his disciples that people would understand who he is by watching how his disciples treat each other. Author Bob Goff writes,

Early on I thought big acts of generosity or great sermons or arenas full of people singing songs would help us understand God's love for us. [Jesus] said it was none of these. Jesus told his friends that letting people see the way we love each other would be the best way to let people know about him. It wouldn't be because we'd given them a lot of directions or instructions or because they memorized or studied all the right things. It would be because someone met you and felt as if they'd just met Jesus.

*(Everybody Always, 2018, Nelson Books, p. 46)*

So was John Lennon right, that all we need is love? Well, we need more than candy hearts and valentines, we need more than a pounding heart and fairy tale fantasies. But if we expand our definition of love as the Bible shows us how, if we take to heart the message of 1 Corinthians 13 and think of love as loving action towards one another, and towards strangers and enemies and the outcast and anyone else in whom Christ can be found, then I think he just might have captured the essence of the New Testament. All we need is Jesus.

And through Jesus, we can begin to know the answer to Tina Turner's eternal question, "What's love got to do with it?"

Everything!