

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

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Learning and Living God's Love, Together 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Corinthians 13

Glimpses of Divine Love

God's love, divine love, is the only love that is truly eternal, everlasting. Our earthly life originates in God's love and is sustained by God's love. While we live on earth, our knowledge of divine love is only partial. And yet, we learn love in relations with other humans.

A few weeks ago, I was in a conversation with some church members. We were talking about a number of concerns we have for people in our community—drug and alcohol addictions, incarceration, youth gone awry. It seemed that for each problem we talked about, I had a story of a neighbor who had been through it, which finally prompted one of the church members to ask, "What kind of a neighborhood do you live in, anyhow?"

We all laughed. I think I live in a pretty typical neighborhood, which is to say that these problems are everywhere. But it made me stop and think about what I know, and don't know, about my neighbors.

Like just about everyone, I know a lot less about my neighbors than people did a generation or more ago. That's a cultural change which has fueled many studies and books. One of those books, entitled *The Vanishing Neighbor* by Marc Dunkelman, provides a helpful image for describing the shift. He compares our circles of relationship to the rings of Saturn. In the "inner ring" are our most intimate relationships, our families and closest friends. In the "outer ring" are acquaintances with whom we have only a distant association. Maybe we share an interest in a local sports team. Or maybe our affinity is our political outlook—which then correlates with where we get our news. But it's the "middle ring" which has been neglected in recent years. The middle ring is that circle of people we relate to because we live in the same neighborhood, or belong to the same church, or maybe the same bowling league.

Dunkelman says it's in the middle ring that we intersect with people who have varied backgrounds and points of view. So that's where we learn to interact respectfully and not demonize people who are different from us. That's where our circle of understanding and acceptance grows. The trend to isolate ourselves into groups of the like-minded diminishes our experience of community. Today's definition of a good neighbor seems to be "someone who doesn't disturb your peace."

But this trend makes it hard to live out the commandment to love our neighbors. Leaving each other alone doesn't sound very much like love. Neighbors who are problematic, who are different, and who have issues can be our best opportunity to practice the sort of love we read about in 1 Corinthians 13—love which is patient and kind, isn't self-centered, and doesn't fly off the handle or keep score. Practice won't make perfect—that's the realm of divine love, not human love. But practice helps us to see glimpses of the eternal love God has in store for us in the eternal life God has planned for us.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians is about discerning the divine in the everyday. There in Corinth, a port city which was the crossroads of the Mediterranean, the love of Christ had brought together people from all walks of life. They were low income, middle income, and wealthy; they were Greeks and Jews, Romans and Syrians. They were merchants and workers, spanning the generations. And they were struggling with tensions about what would hold them together. It wouldn't be their backgrounds or their interests. Their only source of unity was God's love.

Which is why Paul reminded them that Love never ends. We don't see it in our English translations of the Bible, but he was using a specific Greek word for a particular kind of love—*agapē*. *Agapē* is the self-giving love of God embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. It is the love which Christians learn to receive and give to others, love which emulates divine love. Romantic love, despite what the poets say, does not last until the end of time. Family love can be fraught with family pain. Even the bond of friendship, a freely chosen commitment between equals, can be broken by life's storms. But God's love, *agapē*, is everlasting because God is everlasting.

And this is the mystical truth about which Christians have spoken for centuries—that when Christ claims us, and we give ourselves to him, we become part of God's love in the world. We enter into the mystery of eternal life, which is fully known only after we die.

It was mysterious to the composer of Psalm 139, who felt God's unconditional and eternal love wrapped around all the days of his life. It was mysterious to Nicodemus, who was stuck in literal-minded thinking and afraid to contemplate the unknown. It is mysterious to us because none of us have experienced death for ourselves, and the fear of death seems a natural companion to the desire to live.

Yet the experience of God's love now can also diminish our fear of death, for our faith teaches us to trust that there is no end, no limit, no death to God's eternal love.

Now we see in a glass dimly; then we will see face to face. Last week I sat in worship as Dan talked about love, and I experienced a heightened spiritual moment looking at the backs of peoples' heads. Unbeknownst to them, the people in the pews were showing me God's eternal love, alive in them. There was the couple, married for decades, facing dementia together, still a joy to be around, still finding hope and companionship in the church community. There was the woman who has given so much of her time to care for people in need in our community, as always reaching out to the lonely and lost. Here was the man who served his country, who now serves those who are hospitalized with the same loyalty and devotion, plus an extra measure of compassion. There was the couple, recently married, strengthening the bonds of marriage by worshiping God and growing in faith together. Here was the child, eager to speak of God's love. There was the youth, ready to stand tall for Christian faith in the face of derision by schoolmates. And those were just a few. Everywhere I looked, I saw divine love present in ordinary human beings. It was as if the foggy glass had been wiped clear for me, the glass separating God's realm from the earthly realm, and I was looking into eternity. The mist would soon return, but in that moment I knew again why I love church. It's because here, in the ordinary, I see God. Here, in earthly community, I catch glimpses of heaven.

Church is that middle ring where we can grow in our understanding of God's great and eternal love, and practice living it in our lives. I say "practice," because anyone who has spent time in a church community knows that there are slipups among even the most experienced players. We hurt each other and fall far short of the perfect vision of Christ-like love described by Paul. Our practice of love also requires the practice of repentance, and the practice of forgiveness. As I said earlier, this practice won't make us perfect. But it will help make us less arrogant, less rude, less self-centered, and more compassionate. It will help us become the love we receive, and love the ones God gives us as neighbors.

For when we realize that "love never ends," we learn that God's love knows no limits, no boundaries.

God's love is in the air we breathe, the oxygen which bonds with the hemoglobin in our blood and powers the energy processes of our life.

God's love is in the nutrients in the soil which are taken up by plants and transformed into food.

God's love is in the bird's song which expresses the bird's joy and inspires other creatures like humans.

God's love is in the stars and planets, the mysterious moon and the magnificent sun around which this island planet, our home spins.

God's love is in the gravity which holds us in orbit and keeps our feet planted on the ground.

God's love is in the animals we love and the animals we fear, the landscapes which give shelter and nutrition to God's creatures, and even in the darkness of the deepest parts of the ocean.

God's love is under all, above all, in all, through all, both animating force and the power which receives us into eternity.

God's love never ends, for God is love, and God loves all, eternally.

Praised be the God of Love! Alleluia! Amen.