

1 Corinthians 13 (MSG)

13 If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.

² 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.

³⁻⁷ 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.

Love never gives up.

Love cares more for others than for self.

Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.

Love doesn't strut,

Doesn't have a swelled head,

Doesn't force itself on others,

Isn't always "me first,"

Doesn't fly off the handle,

Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,

Doesn't revel when others grovel,

Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,

Puts up with anything,

Trusts God always,

Always looks for the best,

Never looks back,

But keeps going to the end.

⁸⁻¹⁰ Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be canceled.

¹¹ When I was an infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good.

¹² We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!

¹³ But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.

Spiritual Maturity and Seeing Gray

First of all, Paul didn't write this for a wedding, although this is where we often hear these verses. Paul is writing this to a church that is having some difficulty staying together. Generally speaking, all the churches that Paul had planted in various cities had issues, but in Corinth there seemed to be a lot of issues. And if we could give one simple explanation for the problems of

the Corinthian church, or for any church, it would be *spiritual immaturity*. Paul puts it in not-so-subtle terms in the third chapter of this letter:

But for right now, friends, I'm completely frustrated by your unspiritual dealings with each other and with God. You're acting like infants in relation to Christ, capable of nothing much more than nursing at the breast. Well, then, I'll nurse you since you don't seem capable of anything more.

1 Corinthians 3:1-2

Wow! I can't help but wonder what the reaction of the church would have been upon hearing this. How many people walked out of the church at this point? "How dare that guy call me a baby? How dare he call me 'spiritually immature'?" Maybe the Church Council voted not to read the letter at all for fear of losing members. But anyone who is sincere in her or his desire to follow Jesus Christ has to mature spiritually.

What was the problem in Corinth that led Paul to conclude that he was dealing with spiritual infants? PRIDE. Pride is what St. Augustine said was the root of all sin. Pride is what insists that I'm right, that my way is the right way, and if you don't do it my way, I'll leave or force you to change. Specifically in the church in Corinth you had people who were speaking in tongues and exercising these spiritual gifts, but it had gone to their heads; with the ecstatic religious experience came a sense of exclusiveness. They're thinking "God has chosen ME (not YOU) as a vessel of prophecy and tongue-speaking and ecstasy, and that makes me more SPIRITUAL." And with that pride, that feeling of specialty came the idea that I can do no wrong and say no wrong, because it's God doing this, not me. So when Paul had told them about being "free in Christ," they took that to mean that everything is permitted. PRIDE, my brothers and sisters, pride is what causes us to speak and act in ways that are completely unspiritual while claiming that they are.

Of course it's also pride that causes us to judge those who do have such religious experience, who speak in tongues or prophesy, perhaps because we are jealous of those experiences, we discredit them. That too is spiritual immaturity. It's spiritual immaturity to get so stuck in "the way things have always been done" that you can't accept a new way of doing things.

So what Paul does in this letter is to define for the Corinthian Church, and for our church, what we need to do in order to mature spiritually: We are to pursue FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE. – I used a Bible translation called *The Message* for our reading today; many of you are familiar with the NRSV translation of the last verse as *FAITH, HOPE, and LOVE*. I like the translation found in *The Message* which defines these three as verbs rather than nouns – "Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly."

What is faith? Well it's not simply belief in a doctrine. That's a mistake we often make, thinking that we must profess faith in the right doctrine, because that just leads us to pride and the assertion that we have the right doctrine and no one else does. That's what causes us to see

black and white with each side insisting on its own way of seeing things and rejecting anything different from our own way of understanding something.

Another thing that faith is *not* is certainty; by definition faith is uncertainty. If something is a fact, you don't need faith to believe in it. You don't have faith that there is an offering plate on the altar; you perceive it and you know it. But with God you need faith, because we don't perceive God with our eyes. With the Bible you need faith because there's so much we don't know about the writer and the circumstances behind the writing, and so we have to see gray, not simply black and white. As Christians we have faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God because the word has spoken to our hearts and led us to TRUST that this is true. And spiritual maturity means *accepting* that we don't know everything and we CAN'T know everything.

But faith is about so much more than doctrine; it's about trusting in God in our daily walk through life. It's about walking through life prayerfully and being willing to act in ways that please God even when our pride and our self-centeredness would lead us to act otherwise. And because God is unseen, and the consequences of our decisions are not immediately apparent, we walk a bit blindly. Sometimes we don't see where God is leading us, but we have to trust in God like children. If we resort to trusting in ourselves instead of God we end up being proud and deceiving ourselves that we have all the answers and we run into conflict with everyone else who thinks that *they* have all the answers. Spiritual maturity involves humility, accepting the unknown and trusting in God. THAT is faith.

Hope? Hope is what keeps us going through every struggle we face. Hope is the fuel that keeps our faith alive even when everything and everyone around us says, "There is no God." Hope enables us to look at a tragedy and say, "God, I don't understand, but I know you love me, and Jesus has promised me that I will dwell with him in a time and place where there is no more death and no more suffering." Hope sustains faith.

And love? Yes, this is the most important of all. Spiritual maturity is measured in our capacity to love. Adam Hamilton, who authored the book upon which we're basing this worship series, suggests a simple exercise to help us gauge our spiritual maturity in the dimension of love. In verses 4 through 7 of today's reading, each time the word 'love' appears, substitute your name. Let's do this together. Close your eyes, and I'll read these verses, and each time you hear that word 'love,' insert your name:

Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Love doesn't have a swelled head,
Love doesn't force itself on others,
Love isn't always "me first,"
Love doesn't fly off the handle,
Love doesn't keep score of the sins of others,

Love doesn't revel when others grovel,
Love takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Love puts up with anything,
Love trusts God always,
Love always looks for the best,
Love never looks back but keeps going to the end.

How did you do? None of us are perfect, right? But God wants us to be perfected in love, and you notice that trusting in God is something that falls under the category of love. If Christians spend more time developing their capacity to love in the way Paul describes love here, I don't think there would be a decrease in church attendance. There wouldn't be any whispers or murmuring about how screwed up this person is or that person is. I don't think there would be squabbles between people of different denominations. I've printed out wallet-sized cards with these three verses on them so you can keep them with you, to remind yourself of what spiritual maturity looks like. Two ways you can use it. When you sense that your pride is swelling up, take it out and do the little exercise that we just completed – "Matt never gives up...Matt cares more for others than for himself...Matt doesn't have a swelled head." The other way to use it; at the end of the day, in your quiet time with God. Review your day and ask God to work with you on all the ways you fell short of love. Remember, "Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love."