

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Streaming Love

Paul is right; love is greater than faith or hope. Most people believe that love is the greatest “thing” in the world. So many books and songs are written about it, movies are made about it. Our lives focus on it. Everyone agrees that the world would be a better place if there was more love in the world.

Yet our struggle continues; we still have a hard time loving. We all love *some* people; I love my Aunt Rose; I think everyone loves my Aunt Rose. Every memory I have of her is a memory of fun and smiles and joy. I’ve never heard a harsh word from her. When you talk to her, she listens to you. She cares about you. My Aunt Rose is over ninety years old, and she still plays golf. She beat me in ping pong when I played her a few years ago. She is welcoming and gracious and funny. And we all know people like my Aunt Rose, and we love them.

But what about those who are not as welcoming or gracious or funny as Aunt Rose? What about those who are unwelcoming, ungracious, and not-at-all funny? What about those who are proud or dismissive or condescending? What about the ones who always put you down and lift themselves up? Can we love them as we love Aunt Rose? The truth is that there are some people who are easy to love and those who aren’t. There are those we can tolerate for a certain amount of time – there are some that we cannot tolerate at all – but those are not people we love. We invite some people into our homes and parties and others we don’t. Truth be told, we pick and choose who we love and we avoid those we can’t love. None of us love *all* people.

And often we can’t even *maintain* our love for others. The passage that Barbara read to you this morning is probably familiar to you. Even folks who are not churched know this passage because they’ve heard this passage again and again, mostly at weddings. And when we hear this passage being read at a wedding the couple being married are walking on cloud nine – they both have that glassy look in their eyes and everything is perfect between them. Yet there are many who

have stood at that altar only to find that years later they can no longer live with each other, that the love is gone. What happened?

A lot of what happened has to do with a misunderstanding about what love really is. While my Aunt Rose is certainly a lovable person, do I really *love* her or do I simply love the way that I feel when I'm around her – happy, cheerful, confident and relaxed. We often confuse love of others for love of ourselves so that when another person makes us happy we say we love them – it's a common mistake in marriage to believe that you love your partner when you really just love the way you feel when you're around them. In today's reading Paul defines true love not as a feeling but as a way we interact with others. My Aunt Rose is patient and kind, not envious or jealous, therefore I love to be around her *but that doesn't mean that I love her*.

Another misunderstanding about love is that it is simply a state of mind, something that we decide in our head; "I'm going to love that person." Love is action. People like my Aunt Rose work at it. The English translation of this passage doesn't communicate that well; we've simplified it by using adjectives like patient and kind to describe what love *is*, but if we translated the passage literally we would find that Paul describes what love *does* rather than what love *is*; Paul writes that "love *shows* patience, love *acts* with kindness, love doesn't *behave* in an envious way. Love is an action more than a state of being, and it takes practice to get good at it. Ralph was not born with an ability to play guitar; he has put a lot of time and energy into it, so now he's good. Loving is like playing the guitar; you need to put time and energy into it if you want to be good at it – you learn chords and scales and picking patterns and riffs. Now he can pick up a guitar and playing it is natural to him. Because he's good at guitar people like to listen to him. Well Aunt Rose has put time and energy into loving; she works at being welcoming and gracious and funny, and because she works hard at it her love seems to come naturally, but that's because Aunt Rose has worked hard at the art of loving. Because she has worked so hard at being loving most people can say that they love Aunt Rose.

Paul writes this passage to people who need to work on their ability to love. The people at the First United Methodist Church of Corinth have been focused on the gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues and being knowledgeable, and these church folks are quite good at prophesying or speaking in tongues or being knowledgeable, but they do have difficulty being patient and kind, not envious or boastful, or arrogant or rude. Paul has spent the previous two chapters putting these gifted people in the proper place, teaching them that *everyone* has gifts, that *all* gifts are important, that those whose gifts we least recognize are the ones we should honor the most, and that in the church all of our gifts work together to fulfill God's wishes. And now that he has explained to them that none of the gifts matters at all if you lack the most important gift of all; *that none of these gifts amount to anything without LOVE, and clearly the folks of the church in Corinth need to work on their love*.

But there is a third misunderstanding about love that has to do with our ability to grow in love. We can understand that love is not simply a feeling but a way that we choose to interact with others; we can understand that love is action and not a state of mind. But why, if we know these things, do we continue to suffer from a shortage of love in ourselves and in this world? We still lose patience with people we claim that we love the most. We raise our voice and say hurtful

things to those nearest and dearest to us. We give others the cold shoulder. All in all we're not very good at loving despite the fact that we've had thousands of years to work on our capacity to love one another, but we still lack kindness and patience, we still are jealous and envious, we still say and do things that intentionally hurt others. Why, if we know the answers, can't we perfect our ability to love? I think it's because we think that we have what it takes *within us* to fix the mess that we're in. It seems clear that we don't have the capacity within us, *and so we must look for help from the outside, and that help comes from God who is the source of love.* It's important to remind ourselves that love is a gift from God, the source of love, and we need to look to God to figure out how to use this gift.

Which means that apart from God we are unable to truly love others. I love movies, and I love showing movies here at the church, and these days, thanks to Verizon, I can *stream* a movie over the internet. Some folks are amazed by this technology, when I ask folks what movie they want to watch and I can show it them immediately without having to run out and rent the video. It comes through the atmosphere into the computer and gets projected on a screen. Now if the internet is down, if I have no connection with the internet server, I can't stream that movie. I can't stream anything. So it is with love; without a connection to God, we cannot love the way God intends us to love. And so you can see that faith is important as well. Emil Brunner, a great 20th century theologian, writes that "...faith is nothing in itself but the openness of our heart to God's love" (75). Faith is the connection we have with God through which God's love is streamed through us. Without faith in God, there is no connection, and without a connection we cannot truly love.

So three things to remember about love: First, love is not simply a feeling, and it's certainly not all about *your* feelings as we so often think; second, love is not a passive state of being but rather an active behavior that Paul describes to us in this 13 chapter of 1 Corinthians; third, love comes from God, and without a faith connection to God we have no connection with God's love and therefore we cannot *stream* that love in our lives. May God grant us the faith to channel his love first into our own hearts so that we may know what true love really is and then channel that love to others so that they too may experience the love of God.