

**Greatest of these**  
Menno Mennonite Church  
November 10, 2019

**Purpose:** To place the reflection of love in 1 Corinthians 13 into context as a Spiritual fruit

**Message:** As disciples we are called to respond in love not as a mandate of “should” but rather a promise growing from our experience of God’s grace.

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 13 [can we have 2-3 voices read along with me?], Psalm 145:1-8 ( Please read)

**Synopsis:** Love is quite possibly the most over used word in our vocabulary. It is our hope, the promise we make to our spouses, what we say about last night’s tasty dinner. But what does it mean to live, fully in love and out of love? What Paul is saying to the Corinthians far exceeds the easy “be nice and kind to each other” sort of advice, but calling us to the passion filled following of God which would place all of our lives into the context of the best of motivations: love of God and love of the people of God.

(1Co 13:1-13 NRS) NRS 1 Corinthians 13:1  
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.

2 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.

3 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.

4 Love is patient; love is kind;  
love is not envious or boastful  
or arrogant

5 or rude.  
It does not insist on its own way;  
it is not irritable or resentful;

6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing,  
but rejoices in the truth.

7 It bears all things, believes all things,  
hopes all things, endures all things.

8 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.

9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;  
10 but when the complete comes,  
the partial will come to an end.

11 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.

12 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.

13 And now faith, hope, and love abide,  
these three; and the greatest of these is love

Even if you never read the Bible in your life, you likely know these words. They are the words that come between “dearly beloved” and “Pronounce you husband and wife”. These are the words engraved on inspirational plaques sold the world over pointing to faith hope and love as the greatest commandments of all. All of which is well and good. It is fine that we have a go to notion and words that attempt to encapsulate what human love at its best ought to look like. They can serve us in that way; making us feel good and wholesome about what a many splendid thing Love happens to be. Though, if you want the truth, most pastors I know cringe every time we have to preach this text as a wedding meditation. Not a huge amount of depth left there to be explored, at least in the marital end of things. We can do all of these things with this text; but it would come at the cost of what is really being said here. Much of what is being said is actually lost on us.

Sometimes, we have done such a good job of sanitizing scripture because it is just that—the Holy Word—that we leave it devoid of the depth and meaning it was meant to have from the beginning. We forget what these documents are and the purpose they were meant to serve: letters sent from a leader to a church to address the problems of the church. We can forget that these words spoken to real people in real places with big hairy problems. Of how to be church. Of who is inside the body and who was out. Of how we deal with the conflicts that arise when we are close together. Of how to worship and what was right to do in that context. Of the nasty things that one person does to another and the devastation that follows. In other words, they are written to people dealing with the same issues we are today. We divorce the bits we like from the stuff we don’t, sometimes losing the real meaning in the process. Not that any of this is really avoidable—this is what happens when you have 2000 years to think about, study, analyze, read and re-read, slice, dice and put back together again. Every so often we need to go back and remember how things came together in the beginning.

When we do this to the text, we can lose the thread of what’s being talked about here. And this text is a fine example of what can happen when we divide things too finely. Paul is writing to the church at Corinth. It is a church that he himself established on his second missionary journey, and that was experiencing considerable growing pains since. Paul was possessed with a clear and insistent vision for the church and how it should operate. The questions that Corinth is facing both by letter to Paul asking for clarification and by the hear-say

of the circles in which he walked involved leadership, power, money, sex, worship, personal character, and the dynamics of being church together. He spends his whole letter speaking to the needs put out there by the people, addressing their disagreements within the church. Chapter 13, this admonition to love serves as the primary meaning of a whole discussion of everything else the church has going on. This is where he makes his point and brings it all together. In chapter 12 he talks about spiritual gifts in all their diversity making up the body. In chapter 14 he talks about the speaking of tongues in worship and how there needs to be a context and a translation for the tongues in order for them to be relevant to life together. We don't often read this as this is not often our particular gift. You cannot have the things of the spirit without the intention of the Spirit, Paul says, and that is love. Think of this as a theological sandwich, and the love chapter is definitely the meat of the issue. As well it should be. Love lies at the core of the whole of his argument of what it means to be the church.

As much as we pretend otherwise, we know love is hard. It is hard between two people. It is hard, sometimes, even for ourselves. But it is hardest of all within a community. We wish it were the not the case, but other people are hard to love. They just *are*. Think of the experience of a long road trip. As big and romantic as we make them out to be, there is always a moment when the novelty wears off and the work of being simply being confined in the same car sets in; the work of living together, tolerating each other, takes over. It takes patience. It takes kindness. It takes self-control. It takes perseverance. It takes all the stuff that is the fruit of the spirit just to make it through. Rather than love meaning never have to say you are sorry, it turns out that it really means forgiving the other and forgiving yourself over, and over and over again as egos collide, and passions erupt, and plain old disagreements pop up time and again. For wherever two or three are gathered, the Spirit, and injury are sure to follow.

When we got married, I took time to tell Emily that more than likely I would be the primary cause of pain in her life, and she for mine. I am so romantic, aren't I? I said this not because we are bad people or that we don't go out of our way to care for each other—we do in big and small ways every day. Rather, for me this was a deep truth precisely because we are bound so closely together, it only seems likely that we are going to step on each other's toes from time to time. Only the closest to you know how best to injure you. That is true in marriage. It is true in the church. Yet somehow we remain surprised when this actually happens.

I mean how could they—are they seriously that unfeeling? We are shocked; shocked I say that the person(s) we love could treat us badly.

The point of relationship is not to keep ourselves safe from that which would injure us, as tempting as that would be. The point of being people together is to provide a context for God's grace to be extended, from one person, to the next, to the next, if we can only stick around in the uncomfortable aftermath of insult long enough to encounter that grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it well when he wrote *"The Church is the Church only when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live for Christ, is to exist for others."* It doesn't fit well into a tract or on a bumper sticker, and we each need to be reminded of this fact time and again. But it is the essential truth of the Gospel that would call us time and again to this complicated yet essential truth of holy love at work.

I think we keep this chapter concerning itself with hearts and flowers precisely because it is so hard to hear the call to the central root of love in real life. Frankly, if we do look at it as a fruit of the Spirit—a by product of that which God inspires in us, we can regret it—this concept of love is far more manageable and easy when we keep it in the realm of the marriage covenant and romantic entanglements than to dare role a concept as dangerous as this into more public consumption.

But; just as we need to be reminded that love is the hallmark of the gospel, we also must be reminded that the love that we are meant to share is not ultimately our own. We do not bear final responsibility for bearing up under the unbearable, nor for holding all things when our arms are too full of grief, pain, and loss to countenance any other response. Sometimes, there are situations that cannot and should not be borne, even in the name of love. Yet God is the bearer of all things alongside us. God is the lover of those who we struggle to like, let alone show love. God's love encompasses that which we think is impossible to hold together. Sometimes, as we struggle with the hard work of loving we need to be reminded that even where we fail, God's love for us, for the other, and for the world never fails. Rather it endures all things, is sustained even in those situations where love seems most absent, and is the love that will be revealed in full when we finally see with eyes full of wonder the full glory of God. Loving is our work, but it is not solely our responsibility. It is important to remember that while we always must challenge ourselves to the task of loving and accept the complexities of what it means to

love, we do not labor in that task alone, nor are we expected to achieve perfection. There is only one perfection of love: the love of God which we, in turn, reflect. We are called to follow, seeking to follow Christ's example, knowing God's grace when we do, ultimately, fail.

The church is a manifestation of the gifts of God. We need all the gifts of the spirit in order to be the church the world needs. If we speak of all things good in every language and are all things to all people, but have not love, we are nothing. If we give our lives to the service of others, shunning material possessions, but fail to love those we serve, we are no further ahead. That's what Paul said. We who live in a world of contention we must also add "If I can argue my political point and hold all my philosophies with perfect clarity and do not love those with whom I am diametrically opposed, I am nothing." Or "if I keep myself ethically pure, observing to the letter all that is required of my duty and station, and do so in good conscious, but without love for the world in which I live, I have gained nothing." Or "If I mark every tradition and keep every devotion in my heart and do not love, it means nothing to the kingdom of God." We can keep going as you well know.

None of this is easy. Love is always tough. It is not always clear what love looks like, or what a loving response is to a given situation. We each as seeking to love and be loved in the best ways we know how. I will never claim that doing church is easy whether it is in our families, in the congregation, or in the large bodies that bind us together.

But it is this at last: Love wins. At the end of all our striving. At the end of all of our trying to figure out who God is and what God wants of us, Love wins. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love keeps no record of wrongs. That's how we recognize love. Love is the center of it all. It is simple as that. It is as complex as that.

May the God of love keep directing us always into the promises, the challenges, the calling of Love, bringing us ever closer to the way of the kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.