

**Greatest of these**  
Menno Mennonite Church  
September 24, 2023

**Purpose:** To place the reflection of love in 1 Corinthians 13 into context

**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[I will read], Psalm 98

**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.

Love is a many splendid thing. It is also a concept that tends to pop up with alarming frequency. It is interwoven in our everyday lives. We love our families—spouses and children—our country, our work, our places that make us who we are. There is a whole list of things that are right and proper to love and admire within our lives and living. But it doesn't stop there though. Love finds its way into more and more of our life and living. We are invited to express our loves here, there and everywhere, reducing the emotion to an icon to be clicked, liked, and subscribed. We love what we have done with our hair, the color of the new carpet, or the fact that the WSU managed a win last night. All of this, and, of course I could go on before we even get to where we think of love most often—the valentine's day neuro-chemical been struck like and arrow sense of the thing that would take us by storm and that when it is fated will reveal are one true love, at least if the movies are meant to be taken seriously. As the late-great Tina Turner was given to wondering, we must ask here too *What does love got to go with it* after all?

In her song, Tina makes the stark division between the emotional responsive love of infatuation and fascination versus the far more sincere work of making a relationship that actually works, breathes, and moves. When you think about her biography of being connected to tough individuals in tough situations where those who were meant to be loving often weren't she had the real-life experiences to match the poetry that she offers, calling to question the common interpretations of the many cited and exposed virtue of love. Like Tina and her thinking, 1 Corinthians 13 has a meaning and depth to it that we don't always offer it by itself.

For we who have lived our lives within the context of the church, it is all but inevitable to place this chapter where we know it best—at the wedding alter. They are the words that come between “dearly beloved” and “I know pronounce you husband and wife” if an officiant has the opportunity to take their time about marrying a couple. Accordingly, these words and fragments there of have made their way on to inspirational merch of all descriptions with faith hope and love extoled as the greatest of commandments. All of which is good and fine enough; we need words such as these when we are reaching for our best aspirations at the moment of commitment. But as with the other long list of cultural trappings that have been meant to romanticize love—the flowers, the dresses and tuxedos and all the rest—we do well if we can to put a pin in this meaning of the passage as well, at least for the moment. We do ourselves and the relationship we are trying to bless a disservice to allow this passage to be a simple sanctification of that which a couple thinks that they have found and not point to the challenge

that they too are undertaking. By itself this is not a passage for such an occasion, but not entirely for the reasons we most often think.

What ever else you might think of Paul and his writing, I would suggest that you would allow him at least this much: he knew how to make an argument effectively and persistently. He is in full argument mode here. The whole reason that Paul wrote to the Corinthians—twice—is because the church was a mess and then some. We look at some of his other writings where his theological concerns are on display, or even on occasion where he is soliciting support and we know the intent and meaning of this letter. It is a word of advice to the people of the church who were failing to be the church that they were meant to be. The church was rife with drama of every shape, size and form, most of which Paul has spent the proceeding chapters examining in detail and calling them time and again to reform. He has been working through the laundry list of behaviors calling them always to consider other alongside themselves. It is out of this that he pens the metaphor of the body of Christ—chapter 12—with its description of the gifts of the body and working of it that the topic then turns to the issue of love and how to live within it. The body chapter ends as we often read it if you remember: And I will show you a still more excellent way. This is that more excellent way where the body of Christ lives out its gifts—all of them—within the context of the love of God.

This is when Paul then turns to speaking of the way and meaning of love, and, later, to the meaning and foundation of the giftings of the Spirit. We best use this whole section as a connected whole in explaining the way that the life of Christ with all its gives are best lived in context. This section about love is all about how to correctly use the gifts that God has given all of us, the church most of all. It is placing the giftings of God into context of the purposes of God. Love is about how we correctly and responsibly use the freedom we have received in Christ to the service of the whole, and not simply ourselves. This is the agape love—the self giving, self denying love that is spoken of throughout the whole of the new testament. English for all its illustrative strengths is just not up to the task of properly enumerating the nuances of the many portions of the human response to and of love. But what we are after is this far more affectual and impactful love of agape that brings us well beyond what we feel and into how we then wish to ask. It might well be eros love that brings a couple together but it is agape love that sustains them through the years. Agape is the love that is the Godly love that places the salvation of all before the love that God has for God's own son.

Paul relates this whole situation to 3 elements of love that they are to emulate and practice about love: that love is essential, effective, and eternal. Each of these practices invite us into reflection on the natural of love that Paul invites us to consider.

First, love is essential. This is the foundation where it starts. It means being clear about our motivations. All that we do, no matter how heroic, no matter how well practiced, no matter how well intended must always be motivated by love. Otherwise it is useless, and maybe even destructive.

I think this is always something that we do well to consider from time to time. We all have our list of good things to do within the Christian life: the ethics we practice, coming to church, taking on the tasks of the stuff that just needs doing, of making the stuff happen that needs to happen. We do well to sift our own motives now and again and wonder what we might be taking on as obligation, connection, habit, and pride and what we are doing as a loving response in the name of Christ. Motivations ebb and flow over time, and change with our given moods. We do well to always come back to check in with ourselves and with those who we trust to even briefly wonder as to our motivations and to connect them back to the source of all that must be: our love of God and loving in the name of Christ is the only reason to do anything in the context of the body.

Second, effective. That which we do has an impact on our day to day lives. When it does it has characteristics that come out of that practice of love. As Paul lists in the middle verses the qualities of agape love, he is creating a form against which the behavior of the church can be compared. It is as if he is saying to the Corinth church as he has through the whole of the book thus far: You have not been patient, or kind, but you have been envious, boastful, arrogant and rude. It is the litmus test for love: is it inspiring and effecting a loving response—a true response—on the part of the lover. If what we are in the name of Christ is not producing the fruit of the body, then the goals are simply not being achieved. This is not always something that we ourselves are terribly good at evaluating. Sometimes it can be more helpful to have someone who you trust reflect with you about the effectual values that are being fostered in you as you serve. Our individual connections can be at times too close to hand to realistically allow us to evaluate the fruit that is born of what we do.

Third, the love of God that we are called to imitate is eternal. Paul explains that the giftings of this world will in their time end. But our choices and the consequences of them will

have a lasting impact, especially those whose rootedness is found in love. Paul non-to-subtly is asking the church to grow up and stop acting like children and seek the better way. It is time to grow up and live in this new and better way.

The love of God is an action, not a mere affectionate feeling. The romantic idealism of happy-go-lucky feeling has very little to do with the work of the kingdom. This love centered reality is Paul's prescription for what ailed the Corinthian church. It is the essential ingredient for all that we do. It is effective and impactful, fostering in us the fruits of the spirit and the gifts of new life, and ultimately that which makes all the difference in who and what we are. And the consequence of that which we do is eternal as it shapes the kingdom here, reflecting that which is still yet come.

This is the love we are each called to practice. It is the love of God shown us in Christ. It is the way of the law and the prophets rightly enacted and fully known. It is the good news of our time.

May this be our rooting force all the days of our lives. Amen