

**February 3, 2019
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
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“The Gift of Love”

Good morning! I’m so glad it’s February -- a month that is a favorite of mine, because it means that January is over. It’s also the month of St. Valentine’s Day on February 14th, a time when love is in the air, and Mama Sue is talking up the Youth Spaghetti Dinner. It probably won’t shock you to hear that both Mama Sue’s spaghetti sauce and love can get sour if they’re left to sit too long. I’m reminded of a husband and wife who were sitting in their living room having a glass of wine after dinner. They sat in silence for a few minutes, then the wife said “I love you.” And her husband asked, “Is that you or the wines talking?” She said, “No, that was me. I was talking to the wine.”

1 Corinthians 13 is often called the love chapter: accurately so. It’s beautifully written by the apostle Paul and has been quoted by American presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Barack Obama in their inauguration speeches, by authors and filmmakers and songwriters, and by countless pastors at wedding ceremonies. I’ve used it for wedding meditations a few times myself: some of you may remember it from your own wedding. It’s fine for describing a relationship between a wife and husband, but that’s not the occasion this was written for. Paul wrote this because the church at Corinth was in the middle of a big church fight.

That fight was big and sprawling as such things tend to be. This letter which we call 1 Corinthians was at least the second which Paul had written to Corinth -- he refers to an earlier one, but it wasn’t preserved -- and we know that Paul wrote another one a couple years later which we call 2 Corinthians. The Corinthians were a fractious bunch: Corinth was a port city, so it attracted a diverse group of folks ethnically, and there was a wide cross-section socially and

economically, too: a few wealthy people and mostly poor and some slaves. This congregation would have been predominantly Greek and Roman with only a few Jews; and of course, this was the first generation of Christianity, so everyone had different opinions and expectations about what it meant to be a follower of Christ. This letter was written within a generation of the Pentecost conversion and baptism of three thousand people in Jerusalem. In just a few years, believers have gone from the daily practice of sharing what they have with the poor, praying at the temple and breaking bread with glad and generous hearts to flagrant sexual immorality, rival groups jockeying for control, marginalizing poorer members of the congregation, and disdain for those who don't have a full range of spiritual gifts. It's in the middle of all that discord and bad behavior that Paul drops this chapter about love. It wasn't written primarily about love between two people, it was written to describe love within a community which professes to love Jesus Christ.

It's no secret that while we in the church may aspire -- should aspire -- to look like those folks in Jerusalem whom all were in awe of as they praised God with glad and generous hearts, we more often look like the folks in Corinth, with our rivalry and hypocrisy. As long as the church is made up of human beings -- and that's likely to be a long as there is a church on earth -- there's going to be conflict in the church. In any marriage that lasts and any community of faith which endures, there comes a time when we commit to stay together even though it means confessing our own bad behavior, wrestling with other people's bad behavior and figuring out how to move ahead together. Paul describes that process as love.

You probably know that Greek, the language of the New Testament, uses several different words that all translate to the English word love. Eros, from which we get the word *erotic* for physical passion, Storge for familial love, Philia brotherly love, or love for the human family, and Agape for divine love. The King James Version translates agape as "charity," but more recent translations call it love. Although this chapter -- and even sections of this chapter -- can stand alone, 1 Corinthians 13 comes between 1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Corinthians 14, both of which are talking about spiritual gifts, so I want to be sure we consider love -- agape or divine love -- as a spiritual gift.

One of the gifts which folks at Corinth were squabbling about was the gift of speaking in tongues. Specifically, from what we can tell from this letter, folks who did speak in tongues assumed that they were better than those who did not; they thought they had been given a special gift, and were therefore spiritually superior. This is specifically what Paul is addressing at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 13: those who could speak in tongues of humans, and even angels, and people with amazing gifts of prophecy and faith and service (I'm not sure that anyone at Corinth was claim to have these amazing gifts, but Paul is going over the top to make a point): you can be a spiritual superstar and if you don't have love, those gifts are worthless. Ouch. Fortunately, I believe that the inverse of that statement is also true: as long as you have love, you don't have to be a spiritual superstar, your gifts are worthwhile. Mother Teresa of Calcutta summed this up by saying, "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love."

Next week AMBS student Esther Muhagachi will bring a message about spiritual gifts, and particularly her call to ministry. The following week we'll focus on the spiritual gift of hospitality. But those gifts and other gifts, including evangelism, teaching, healing and all kinds of leadership: administrators, mentors, anointing, prayer -- whatever -- are to be shared with love, a generosity which is not jealous or boastful or irritable or resentful, which does not insist on its own way, and is not boastful or arrogant or rude. And that, sisters and brothers, is a pretty high bar. I think we can be pardoned for not always clearing that bar, as long as we can acknowledge when we have fallen short, and are willing to set the bar back up where it belongs and try again. And here, I believe, is a significant difference between agape, divine love, and any other kind of love. Agape love never ends.

You don't need me to tell you that human relationships end. Sometimes with death, but also with separation, divorce, anger, or indifference. I don't want to minimize the pain that comes with the end of a relationship, and I'm certainly not in a position to judge anyone else: I'm not always the best judge of my own behavior, let alone yours. I know that marriages which have begun with love and optimism and commitment have ended in disillusionment and frustration and grief. I do not think that agape love means putting up

with whatever abuse someone else is handing out. I know this passage has been used to support that view, especially those verses which say love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. Enduring all things cannot happen on only one side of a human relationship: it is only when both people commit to agape love that it can happen. Remember, Paul did not write these words for two people getting married, he wrote them to a church community which was already experiencing conflict -- which is an exponentially more complicated dynamic. Paul acknowledges, rightly so, that all the things we put such a high value on, knowledge, prophecy, wisdom -- those are all going to come to an end. Not only will they end eventually, but maybe we don't actually see them as clearly as we think we do. Even if we are personally blessed with spiritual gifts, we are still only seeing dimly, or only seeing a part of what is known and held in the heart of God. Some humility about those limitations, and an understanding that it isn't just that everyone else who is short-sighted, but that my vision is also partially obscured is essential if we are going to move forward together.

Some of you are aware that the Church of the Brethren is in the midst of a multi-year process of developing a compelling vision, in hopes that the end result will bring us closer to common goals and unity of purpose. So far there have been Table Talk sessions at 2018 Annual Conference and feedback from participants at National Youth Conference last summer in Fort Collins, CO. Denominational representatives were here in N Indiana in November -- I know some of you attended those sessions -- and they are planning to visit each district. There will be no new business this year at Annual Conference so that we can work on this vision together. It's an admirable and ambitious process. The folks on the compelling vision team are smart and theologically educated -- I bet they've even been to a wedding or two and heard this chapter read. There are good words here for a couple beginning a marriage, but perhaps it is even more instructive for congregations and how we function, and for our denomination or any Christian body which is seeking to incorporate many gifts and lots of knowledge and wisdom. I believe that God has given us the gifts that we need -- both the amount and the diversity -- to do the work of building up the body of Christ. But even when our work ends, God's love for us will never end. We need to do that work and respond to God's call with great love. Not only commitment and

optimism, but with our best effort at an agape love that is patient and kind and not boastful or arrogant. With a love that acknowledges that we know only a part, and somebody else may know a different part; with a love that acknowledges that when I am face to face with you, I am given a glimpse of God; with a love which allows God to fully know us, because having God know us and love us is the greatest gift of all. Amen.