

Sermon #979: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
9-2-12 (Trinity 13), Bethany-Princeton MN

TRUE LOVE IS PRACTICING THE TRUE FAITH

Prayer: Merciful God and Father, You require of us fervent love of You and of our neighbor: We humbly ask You, graciously govern us by Your Holy Spirit, that we may never offend against love nor devote Your gifts to our own glory and profit, but according to Your good pleasure and for our neighbor's welfare, grow continually in true faith and genuine love; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen. (*Collect on the Epistle for Quinquagesima Sunday*)

The Text, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13. ¹ Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ² And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. ⁴ Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; ⁵ does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; ⁶ does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part. ¹⁰ But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. ¹³ And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

Around the time of the most recent royal wedding, an internet website gave a "top ten" list of Bible readings for weddings, and 1 Corinthians 13 came in #2. Here is how they summarized this section of the Bible: *"This is the classic Biblical passage about love. It presents love at its best and yet is not too preachy or religious-*

sounding, thus making it a great choice for a civil wedding ceremony. This wedding reading is all about that ideal love we all hope to find with our partner.” (www.squidoo.com, “Bible Readings for Weddings”)

That is probably a pretty common assumption about this chapter. It’s all about love, love between people, “that ideal love” as it says. Who can disagree about anything it says here? Wouldn’t even unbelievers agree with these statements about love? **“Love is patient, love is kind,”** etc. It seems so nice, non-confrontational. I want to highlight from this internet summary that it commends this verse for being *“a great choice for a civil wedding ceremony”* and that it’s about love *“with our partner.”* So it imagines that if you are talking about same-sex marriage or if you’re talking about people who “love” each other but have been living together outside of marriage, this would not have anything remotely negative or critical to say to them but would be inclusive and tolerant. All of which should hint, hint, that this is a very wrong interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13.

That interpretation of this chapter comes from taking it out of context. If you look not only at 1 Corinthians 13, but especially at the chapters that come right before it and the chapter that comes after it, you see that the apostle Paul is not really addressing the love one person shows for another. He is writing to a congregation. In fact, he is writing about congregational life.

In chapters 10 and 11, St. Paul writes about how they were misusing the Lord’s Supper, and he uses the phrase “when you come together,” in public worship. In chapter 12, St. Paul speaks of the “spiritual gifts” of which the Corinthian Christians were so proud, and again he describes things that were taking place in the worship service. His point in chapter 12 is that far from letting them show off their individual talents, spiritual gifts should only be used to serve and edify each other, to draw together as a church. St. Paul continues this discussion in chapter 14, where he writes, *“Whenever you come together, each of you has a*

psalm, has a teaching, has [speaks in] a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification" (1Co 14:26). This is also where he famously – and in our time controversially – says, *"Let your women keep silent in the churches" (14:34).* He is not commanding women to be silent in general, but it's about public preaching and teaching of the Word in public worship, everything he is talking about here is about "when they come together," in the church service.

And – surprise! – this discussion is filled with contention and disagreement, as it has been recorded for us in 1 Corinthians. The last thing you expect when you come to church is dissension and arguing. This is where the Holy Spirit creates faith, gathers the church, His own creation (not ours) and keeps it in *unity* of spirit. Here forgiveness and salvation come through Jesus' merit. So we come expecting everything to be peaceful and harmonious. And this is the reason all these problems of the church in Corinth are addressed in detail for us to read. Their shattered expectations are our shattered expectations. Their inability to be at peace with each other is ours. Their being self-involved and self-focused is repeated by us. Their failure to listen to God's Word with humble hearts, as a congregation, is mirrored by every congregation. If you think your church is lacking in some way, or has problems, or people here disappoint you, then welcome to the church in Corinth and the church on earth, which is called "the church *militant*" because it struggles and often feels like the devil has it in retreat.

This is the reason for chapter 13. St. Paul is in the middle of an important discussion, but he has to stop and say something about love. When you read it this way, it does not sound calm, detached, and poetic. St. Paul is thinking about what is going on in the congregation, how they are pulling apart, and he writes: **"Though I speak with tongues ... Though I have the gift of prophecy, and though I have all faith ... And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and HAVE NOT LOVE, it profits me nothing. LOVE suffers LONG and is**

KIND; love does NOT envy; love does NOT parade itself, is NOT puffed up; does NOT seek its own, is NOT provoked,” etc. You can hear his voice rising in agitation and heartfelt sadness over what is going on in the congregation. He is not extolling personal love in interpersonal relationships, as much as pointing out a lack of love in the congregation. He traces their departures from the true teaching of God’s Word to this self-willed lack of love for one another.

How does this happen in the church of today? We who sit together in the church service, listen at Jesus’ feet to the true teaching of His Word, kneel together at the altar and greet each other so kindly, are tempted to be disappointed with each other, to complain about each other, and to judgmentally think less of each other. The way people mistreat each other in the church often itself leads to false doctrine, as our Lutheran Confessions say so well:

There should be love in the Church in order that it may preserve unity, bear with the harsher manner of brethren as there is need, and overlook certain less serious mistakes. This must happen or else the Church will fly apart into various schisms, and hostilities and factions and heresies will arise from the schisms. (Apology IV.232]

So this discussion of love, what love does, and how we often lack love, is connected with the church’s *worship*. Where, above all, should you be loving God and your neighbor as you should? When you are in God’s very presence.

And yet we struggle to do this. So what do you do with this failure to love God and your fellow Christians, while in the presence of God? You make use of this presence of His. He is present with you in His Word and Sacraments, for one reason: to LOVE you with a forgiving love. So *this* love which St. Paul extols in 1 Corinthians 13 is not what so many think it is, it isn’t the love you feel in your heart for someone. It doesn’t begin with you and what is in your heart. It begins with God and what is in His heart. Where do you find this? In His Word. This love is contained in His Word and that’s how it comes to you and flows to others.

So the truth of His Word – the true faith – is closely connected to true love. One little sentence in this chapter says that. It’s what all those people forget who love these verses but think they can go on in sinful ways. It’s the most important verse here: **“Love does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth.”**

This verse saves us. This verse saves us from the wrong understanding of this chapter. Because this verse is where you find Jesus. Even if you take all the other statements about love and foolishly think you’re able to do this, this verse describes something you can’t do yourself. To “rejoice in the truth” means to believe in Christ. This is something nobody can do by his own reason or strength. By your own strength you do the opposite: rejoice in iniquity, continue in sin, make excuses for what you do, and tolerate all kinds of wickedness. But when you don’t do that, instead you **“rejoice in the truth,”** it is not your work but the work of the Holy Spirit, that by grace you hear His Word and believe, that you believe His word of forgiveness, that His forgiving love enters your heart, dwells there, and flows out to others, and ***“this is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”*** The Truth is a Person, Jesus Christ, who said, ***“I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”***

In Him truth and love come together. True love is simply living out the true faith. When we as a church, or as individual Christians, lack this love, the thing to do is to come to Him, to receive more of His truth and more of His forgiving love, so that we can give it away to each other. Amen!