

“Love Is the Greatest”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
Western Boulevard Presbyterian Church – Raleigh, North Carolina
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1 Corinthians 13

What is love? Is it an emotion, most notably sentimentalized at weddings or on holidays like Valentine’s Day in two weeks? Is it a feeling, something that touches us as teenagers, young adults, or later in life, impacting our whole physical being with how we are attracted to another human being? Is it an action, something that motivates us to do certain things, or care for other people, or make specific choices, all in the name of love?

How do we react to the idea of love? Do we recall fond memories of family, spouses, children, or friends? Do we remember loves that have been lost, and the grief that goes with our sadness? Do we feel envy at others who have experienced love in ways we have not? Does the idea of love bring with it more pain and emptiness than joy and happiness?

Whenever we hear the word “love,” we have all of these and many other thoughts and feelings flowing through our hearts and minds. That is because love is something that, on a human level, can mean many different things and be experienced by us humans in many different ways. It can be the most powerful of experiences for us human beings, and it can be the most mysterious and baffling of experiences for us human beings.

And yet, love is one of the cornerstones of our Christian faith. It is the word we most often use to describe God’s relation to us in Jesus Christ: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son . . .” (John 3:16). It is how we are called to live in community with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. It is a word that speaks to relationship, to service, to faith.

Today we have heard one of the most familiar passages on love: 1 Corinthians 13. We most often associate this passage with weddings, and either had it read at our own wedding, or we heard it at a wedding we have attended. Probably one of the reasons it is so often used at weddings – whether they are religious in nature or not – is because the subject of the entire passage is love. If you were hearing this for the first time, or without much context to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, you might assume that it’s just all about love.

Jerry Irish writes: *How surprised the apostle Paul would be to discover that this most challenging and grace-filled ode to love has become a staple of secular and quasi-religious marriage ceremonies! No wonder, given the absence of any reference to God or Jesus Christ in the text itself. If we are to get at its theological meaning, we must place it back in Paul’s letter and remind ourselves of the author’s intention in addressing these words to the church in Corinth.*

Apparently Paul has heard that some members of the Corinthian congregation are trying to enhance their status on the basis of their particular spiritual gifts. Sound

familiar? In the preceding chapter, Paul counters this by asserting that all spiritual gifts are manifestations of the Spirit of God. He likens the church to a body of diverse members, each playing an essential role for the good of the whole. Then in this chapter, lest there be any lingering doubt about the folly of taking pride in one's knowledge or one's capacity to speak in tongues or to prophesy, Paul claims that love trumps all such gifts (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 302*).

How many times have we said to ourselves, "If only I could love that person more"? Many times, as human beings, we equate love as a skill that can be honed and mastered. But look at how Paul speaks of the gifts in this passage, and notice that love is not a gift, but rather a state of being. "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. If I have prophetic powers, understanding all mysteries and 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 of my possessions, but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

In others words, if our actions, our decisions, our lives are not first motivated by love, then what we are doing is pointless, meaningless, fruitless in the eyes of God. No matter how eloquently we speak, without love our words are simply noise. No matter how knowledgeable or faithful we may be, without love our beliefs are pointless. No matter how much we give away of our time, talent, and treasure, without love our giving is empty.

That is because the love Paul speaks of is rooted in relationship: relationship between us and our Creator, us and our Redeemer, us and our Sustainer, and our relationship with one another. And in those relationships, love's identity shines forth. Love is patient and kind. It does not take joy in others' misfortunes, nor does it insist on getting its own way. Love does not hold grudges, nor does it become irritable in the face of the smallest of annoyances. Love bears, believes, hopes, and endures at all times in all ways (1 Cor. 13: 4-7).

Today we have the joy of ordaining and installing new ruling elders and deacons into service at Western Boulevard. One of the things I have always appreciated about being Presbyterian is that we believe that women and men are called to leadership roles at particular times in the church's life, with the particular gifts and abilities God has blessed each of them with. Some are people who have much experience in church leadership; some are people who are new to such leadership roles. Yet we adhere to the belief that all are equally and uniquely equipped by the Spirit to serve the common good of the Body of Christ.

Later, we will hear these men and women answer the constitutional questions asked of all new officers in the church. And one of those questions will speak not to their knowledge, or faith, or skill-set, but will speak of their state of being as they serve God's people: "Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?" It is a reminder of Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, that unless we seek to be disciples in a spirit of love, our time and talents are useless.

Jerry Irish continues: *For Paul, our capacity to flourish as human beings is realized to the extent that we can live in the love of God revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ . . . Is such love humanly possible? As an individual character trait or a personal*

attitude, no; but as the presence of God's love in Christ crucified and in a community of believers that live in that love, yes. To belong to God's church in Corinth (and today) is to be an agent of God's love in the world, not seeking one's own advantage, but working on behalf of others . . .

The love described in 1 Corinthians 13 is a love we experience as God's unshakable grasp upon our lives. It is the source of our greatest security and, thus, our freedom to actually be patient and kind, to bear all things and not insist on our own way. (As humans, we have not only grown immeasurably in our knowledge, but also in our belief that we know what is best as masters of such knowledge). Paul is raising similar issues in the church in Corinth, as we must in our own churches and in the larger world, where insisting on our own way wreaks havoc with other peoples, not to mention the natural environment. Lest our efforts be additional acts of human willfulness, let them spring from the love of God, that love which distinguishes 1 Corinthians 13 (ibid).

The love that Paul speaks of here is rooted in our knowledge of God's love for us. God gave of Godself – sacrificed on our behalf – that which was most precious to God: God's only Son. That is the love we know as Christians. The Greek word used for this sacrificial love is "agape." It is not a love that is sensual, or a love that is on the surface of a relationship. Agape love is rooted in the willingness to think first of the other, and to live one's life with that motivation.

Paul calls on us to live out this agape love because God has first shown us agape love in God's Son, Jesus Christ. If we have been loved in such a sacrificial, boundless way, why shouldn't our lives be embodied by that love for our sisters and brothers in Christ? Why shouldn't we listen, speak, act, all with love as our motivation? That is why, as Paul concludes, "Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13).

How are we being called today to share that agape love as Western Boulevard Presbyterian Church? Are we willing to step out and take risks to love all of God's children? Or will we remain in our comfort zones, only loving sacrificially those who we know and care about?

I want to share with you something that happened last month. It was December 19, Bruce Grady's last Sunday with us at Western Boulevard, and the Sunday before Christmas. I pulled into the parking lot, and as I drove past the sanctuary I noticed a large bag or bundle of stuff by the front door. I didn't think much of it and went about my morning routine of settling in.

When I went from my office over to the sanctuary, I looked out the front door and noticed what I thought had been a large bag outside the door was actually a young man in a sleeping bag. I was taken aback at first, but then I went outside and introduced myself to him. He was very polite and a bit embarrassed, because he had hoped to be out of the way before anyone arrived. He couldn't have been more than 25-years-old, and he was grateful to have had a place to sleep out of the cold rain that had been falling overnight.

I asked him if there was anything I could do for him, and at first he declined and thanked me for letting him stay there. Then he asked if he could use the restroom, and I said, "Of course," and he was grateful to have a warm, clean place to get cleaned up. He

never asked for food or money or clothes – he just appreciated being seen for who he was.

We will continue to be called to serve God’s children in places far from home. But how will we respond to God’s call to love sacrificially those who are literally on our doorstep? Will we turn them away because they do not look like us, dress like us, or are a perceived threat to our safety? Or will we see them as a fellow human being, created in the image of God, and show them the same agape love we would show our family or close friends?

I have forgotten that young man’s name - but I will never forget his face. May we all see the faces of those God calls us to love in the same way God has loved each of us unconditionally through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.