

Letting Our Lives Speak Love

1 Corinthians 13

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Our second reading today picks up where we left off last week in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Some of you may remember that last week, in chapter 12, Paul described the Corinthian Christian community as a living body, consisting of many different members, all functioning different but essential roles for the good of the body. As the body of Christ, together, no member of the body goes unnoticed or unvalued, and when one member suffers, all suffer with her or him. We are differently gifted, and interdependent, as a community, united by the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 13 (NRSV)

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. 2And 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. 3If 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.

4Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8Love 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. 9For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11When 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. 12For 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. 13And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

First of all, nobody's getting married today. Many of you have probably heard this scripture in more weddings than you have Sabbath worship services. The text appears in many weddings because it is strangely one of the few texts in all the Bible that appears to talk explicitly about love. But if we've come to familiarity with this text in weddings, as I suspect most of us have, we risk missing its meaning.

Because this is a text not for couples, but for churches. Paul writes this discourse about love to the churches in the great city of Corinth, who weren't acting much like churches. They were divided, individualistic, and boastful, not acting very Christ-like, it seemed to Paul. A bunch of self-proclaimed spiritual Olympians, who think that special gifts of faith or prophecy or charity makes them closer to God, better in the eyes of God. And to these divided, self-focused people Paul writes "If I speak in the tongues of angels, if I have prophetic powers, if I have faith that moves mountains, if I give away everything for gain, but do not love others, I am nothing." None of what you or I do matters, says Paul, unless we give ourselves in love.

Not just love, a feeling of affection, as we understand the generic English word "love." Paul composed this letter in Greek, and used not the word eros, or romantic love, but he used the word agape, which means self-giving love. AGAPE is a specific kind of love, an active love, a self-giving love, a going-to-be-with love, a laying-down-your-life-for-someone love. Agape love is not romantic love or parental affection, not desire, not loyalty, it is sacrificing love, the kind of love that you don't just feel, you practice.

One more clarifying note, so that we can make sure we're not listening with our wedding ears this morning, this is a text not about receiving love, or having love given to you, this is a text about exhibiting love with our lives. When Paul says, if I can speak in tongues, or have prophetic powers, or have a great faith, but do not HAVE LOVE... Although the English makes it seem like Paul is saying, if I am not loved by someone else,

I am nothing, that's not what this text says. Paul is saying, if I am not letting my life speak love to others, then I am nothing. As the great song goes, they'll know we are Christians by our love, says Paul, an active self-giving love that characterized Christ himself.

Living a life that speaks agape love is not easy. As someone has said, "It is not that we have tried Christianity and found it incomprehensible. The problem is that we tried Christianity and found it difficult!" Our problem is not that there are vast portions of scripture that we don't understand; our problem is that there are many portions of scripture that we understand all too well! We know that these verses demand transformation, change, detoxification, and conversion that can be painful.

Sandra always looked up to her sister-in-law Judy for her creative mothering. While Sandra was struggling to raise her own two kids, Judy seemed to always have time to paint the walls of her three children with Beatrix Potter characters. Sandra's children always yearned to go to their cousins' birthday parties thrown by Aunt Judy because they never knew what might happen, perhaps a giant talcum-powder-breathing dragon would appear again. But one Saturday morning Judy was folding laundry and her throat closed. Though the paramedics arrived quickly, it was not quickly enough, and her previously creative and tireless brain had been so damaged she entered a permanent vegetative state. All of a sudden, the great Aunt Judy, and her creative mind, had been relegated to a convalescent hospital where she sat mindless and motionless.

And suddenly Sandra, the struggling mother of 2, found herself the intensely struggling mother of 5 children 6 years and under, with Judy lying in a hospital bed a few minutes away. Sandra noticed the first couple of visits to Judy's bedside were torturous for the family, and if they had waited until someone in the house wanted to visit, no one ever would have. So in the middle of this life upheaval and a state of being totally overwhelmed, Sandra decided to turn Judy's hospital room into a carnival, with painted walls, shelves full of games, and mountains of sugary sweets everywhere. There were crafts materials everywhere, and Sandra and the kids each visit started to make decorations and keepsakes in Judy's presence. It didn't take long, Sandra says, before every one of the kids would leap up to go visit Judy.

This is a story about a terribly selfless woman named Sandra, but even more miraculous about the love she shows is not just being self-less, but hers was a love filled with the others she was trying to love. There are qualities of this loving that Sandra feels compelled to tell about, "the interesting thing is," she says, "that I loathe crafting, which we'd do for hours in Judy's room while playing the Nutcracker CD. I also hate convalescent homes, and I'm not a particularly nurturing person. What drove me was the opportunity to tell a story about this new life we'd been given that DID NOT end with Judy alone in a room, that DID NOT end with her kids not knowing their mother, that DID NOT end with creativity lost in the family forever, that DID NOT end with only sadness. Sandra's story is about a life driven not by the horrible reality around her, but driven by a different narrative, a narrative of defiance, with a different ending, with a driving theme not of tragedy but of giving love.¹

And this is Paul's last point, that lives lived in community, characterized by agape self-giving love, are the lives equipped and pointed toward Heaven. This is how we move from the life defined by our culture and the harsh world around us to a life defined by Christ's gospel love, by stopping the flow of being overwhelmed and disappointed in its tracks, and refusing to be defined by the way things seem all too often, but to give yourself in love. Let's try love, as one of you preached to me this week, if you're tired of all that life throws at us, if you're tired of division and misunderstanding and mistrust, let's do something radical, let's try agape love.

It is this that I think St. Francis of Assisi was referring to when he said, "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if you have to."

The next wedding you go to that uses this scripture, you might just say to the person next to you, "I hope they know what they're getting themselves into!"

¹ Sandra Tsing Loh, "Bad Mothering," *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2009. <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200912/tsingloh-bad-mother/2>.