

From Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*.

1 Corinthians 13

"If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.

² If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing.

³⁻⁷ If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

Love never gives up.
 Love cares more for others than for self.
 Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
 Love doesn't strut,
 Doesn't have a swelled head,
 Doesn't force itself on others,
 Isn't always "me first,"
 Doesn't fly off the handle,
 Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
 Doesn't revel when others grovel,
 Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
 Puts up with anything,
 Trusts God always,
 Always looks for the best,
 Never looks back,
 But keeps going to the end.

⁸⁻¹⁰ Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be canceled.

¹¹ When I was an infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good.

¹² We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!

¹³ But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.”

Let us pray. Gracious, loving God, prepare us this day to hear and share your word. Help us to be open to your leading in all we say and do. Amen.

This morning's scripture passage is one that is very familiar to most of us. This passage is most commonly used in weddings and that links it with hearts and bows and flowers and frilly wedding dresses. It is a beautiful poem of romantic love.

You know what? That is not actually true. This is not a poem idealizing love¹. Paul is not writing here about romantic love or finding the perfect marriage partner. Such images are far removed from Paul's original concerns. The love of which Paul writes so eloquently is a love that does not originate in one individual and reach out to

¹ M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 537.

another.² Rather the love celebrated in the text comes from God, claims us, and through us reaches out to others, not simply to another person whom we wish for our spouse. The love about which Paul writes can never find its sole object in another single individual but reaches out through and beyond that other person.³

Paul was addressing the Corinthians about the use of spiritual gifts and how none of the spiritual gifts can be used properly or understood fully without love. The love Paul refers to here is not Eros, or romantic love as we think about it. It is *agape*. Many of you have probably heard the word *agape*. It is a Greek word meaning the unmerited love God shows to humankind in sending his son as suffering redeemer. *Agape* is a selfless and self-giving love. It is loving someone or doing something for them even if they have done nothing to earn it. This is the love Paul wants us to understand.

Paul is calling us to actively engage in this *agape* love and put it into action toward one another. Paul did not write about *agape* love to make us go crazy over marriage or some romantic notion we might have. Paul was writing about the need for mutual concern and

² J. Paul Sampley, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes (Acts, Introduction to Epistolary Literature, Romans, 1 Corinthians)* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 957.

³ J. Paul Sampley, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes (Acts, Introduction to Epistolary Literature, Romans, 1 Corinthians)*, 957.

consideration within the community of the church. Remember when we say church, we mean the people of Jesus, all the people. So, Paul is talking about all of us and putting love at the center of our faith. Love is the one characteristic of the believing life that cannot be missing. Without love, no matter how many possessions you have or how prominent you are, you have nothing.

This agape love is what we are to show to one another. The best example we have of agape love is the love God has for us. And the ultimate act of agape love was when God gave his only Son, Jesus, to be crucified on the cross, to die and to be resurrected so that we all could be forgiven for our sins. We celebrated that gift just last week. But we need to remember that every Sunday is a mini Easter, a time to remember the selfless act of God so that we might be forgiven and have eternal life.

Like many of you, I know what love is. I have experienced love in a romantic way. And I love my family and friends. But do I truly know what Christian love is and how I am supposed to live out this agape love, selfless and self-giving? I would venture to guess that most of us struggle with this charge to put selfless and self-giving love at the center of our Christian faith.

So today, I want us to look at the middle part of this passage, so we might understand more fully this agape love that we must have for everyone. Verses 4 through 7 spell out to us what agape does, the characteristics of agape love. As we look at these characteristics, I think you will see that we are describing who and what Jesus was and taught because not only was Jesus the gift of agape, he embodied agape.

The first characteristic, or quality, of love is patience. I am not talking about being long suffering with the difficulties of life. The patience Paul refers to is with **people**. Now, I don't know about you, but patience is one characteristic that I find runs short on long, busy days. And for you parents, patience can often be an exercise in futility. But, I do keep practicing. And I have taught myself that when my patience is running thin and I am a bit annoyed with someone, I need to stop and think about the day that person may be having and sometimes I need to step away. So far, it has helped me extend my patience in most cases. Although, I have found patience is much easier to extend to persons you do not know very well or that you interact with for only a short time than it is to your children, spouse or family members.

But, as faithful Christians, we must exercise the same patience as God exercises with us⁴. Now think about that. Think about the patience God exercises with us, how we try to do things on our own, how we try to be in control, how we continue to ignore God's voice. But God never gives up. And Jesus with the disciples, well, one of them betrayed him and another denied him and yet he still loved them. Such patience is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength.

Love is kind. Love cares more for others than it does for one's self. There is in so many people an attitude of criticism. For so many, it is easier to be critical than to be kind. So many good people would have sided with the rulers and not with Jesus in so many of the stories we know, the woman at the well, the lepers, Zacchaeus. But Jesus showed kindness, he reached out to those others rejected and ridiculed.

Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. If we are honest, I think this is one characteristic of agape love that we all struggle with from time to time. We want what someone else has. We brag about our own accomplishments. We treat others with disdain or unimportance.

⁴ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Letters to the Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 141.

We envy what others have. For us ladies, that might mean the latest designer handbag or shoes. For you gentlemen, maybe it is a power tool or sports car. But there are two kinds of envy. There is that envy I just mentioned of coveting the possessions of other people. This envy is hard to avoid because it is a very human failing. But there is a worse type of envy. The envy that begrudges the very fact that others have what you do not. This envy does not so much want things for itself as wish that others had not gotten them. This is the envy that wants someone to fail just for the sake of failing.

The reverse of that is we want everyone to know what we have, what we have accomplished and are not very nice about any of it. But true love is always far more impressed with its own **unworthiness** than its own merit. Really great people never think of how great or important they are. And the graciousness of Christian love never forgets that being polite or courteous or tactful should be part of our Christian character. Jesus, when asked if he was the Son of God, instead of bragging and saying, "yes, I am" and using it for gain, he responded, "You say that I am."

Love does not insist on its own way. Well now, if we could all work towards developing this characteristic of agape love, wouldn't the

world be a better place? This can divide people into two categories—those who always insist upon their privileges and those who always remember their responsibilities; those who are always thinking of what life owes them and those who never forget what they owe to life.⁵ It would be the key to almost all the problems which surround us today if people would think less of their rights and more of their duties, if they think less of what they want and more of what benefits others. How often did Jesus chose to do for others instead of helping himself?

Love is not irritable or resentful. Christian love never becomes annoyed or frustrated with people. This is always a sign of failure and Christian love does not fail and is not defeated. Christian love has also learned to forget. There is no holding onto a wrong that was done to you so you can repay it later. Agape means letting go. Matthew 5 tells us that when someone strikes you on the cheek, to turn the other also. It tells us an eye for an eye is wrong. Forgetting is a key to being able to love.

Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but it rejoices in the truth. As humans, we very often would rather hear of the misfortune of others

⁵ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Letters to the Corinthians*, 143.

than of their good fortune. It is much easier to weep with those who weep than to rejoice with those who rejoice. And yet, Paul tells us it is better to rejoice with those who rejoice.

Christian love does not hide the truth. What gain is there in keeping the truth from others, hiding things? Being honest, no matter how difficult, is always the best policy and allows us to love unselfishly.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love can bear any insult, injury, any disappointment that comes its way. This is the kind of love that was in the heart of Jesus himself. Jesus saw in others what God sees in them. Love takes God at God's word and believes the best about other people. Love never ceases to hope, to believe that anything is possible. Love bears everything with triumphant fortitude.

What each of these characteristics stresses is the self-giving, sacrificial dimension of agape. Paul insists that agape, selfless, self-giving love, builds up the body. Love translates into a form of life that does not insist on its own way, is not egocentric but self-giving. This

was the way of Christ.⁶ This is the love we should show to one another.

This is what agape love is, forgetting about our own wants and needs and thinking about others. When we act in agape love, we draw closer to God.

Agape love is an unmerited act of love for another human being without expecting anything in return. It is what being Christian is about, caring for one another. This is the kind of love Paul wants us to know about and practice. This is the kind of love I want to show my fellow man each day as I strive to be a faithful Christian and honor God. This is agape love and it far exceeds anything romantic love can do.

Agape love will stand the test of time. When everything else is gone, there will still be love. The unmerited love God shows in Jesus Christ will never end. God is love and only those who love can see God. Agape. Selfless, self-giving love. It was given to us from God and we were shown how to live it out by Jesus. God offers it to us and we are called to offer it to one another. Are you ready to accept

⁶ Fred B. Craddock et al, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1994) 91.

this gift? Are you prepared to work to build the characteristics of this love in your life? Amen.