

How We Love: Let us Count the Ways
1 Corinthians 13: 1-13
January 28, 2007
Rev. Mary A. James

Chances are you have heard this gorgeous passage from Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth read at a wedding, or perhaps you even included it in your own wedding ceremony. Weddings are certainly where we most often hear it, and these beautiful words on love are some of the most soaring and eloquent in all of scripture.

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

These words seem tailor-made for the marriage ceremony! The funny thing is that as perfectly suited as these words seem for describing the ideal romantic partnership, they are **not** about romantic love. Now, this is not to say using them at a wedding isn't a good idea. These words on love have such a broad application that it is a pretty benign out-of-context use for a scriptural passage; like many scriptures, it has a universal ring to it, and in its eloquence, it has a trajectory of meaning that causes it to burst out of its original context in ways that actually work pretty well. But we'd be making a big mistake if we left 1 Corinthians 13 only to the marriage context! It's really meant to be heard by the church as a guideline for how to relate to one another in the Christian community—more or less the ultimate in by-laws!

Last week we talked about the divisions and difficulties that were going on in the Corinthian church, and that Paul wrote this letter we know as 1 Corinthians in order to address those problems. We talked about the equally beautiful twelfth chapter of the letter in which Paul calls upon the church members to recognize the many spiritual gifts in the congregation, to set aside arrogance, rudeness and all **kinds** of bad behavior. He gives us the beautiful metaphor of the church as the body of Christ, the importance of all the members of the body, and he implores the members of the Corinthian church to honor those who are poor, weak, and of lower social status. The thirteenth chapter on love is the continuation of this conversation. Paul is explicating further how the members of this early Christian community are to behave toward one another.

If Paul isn't writing about romantic love, well, then what is he saying here? If it were about that sort of love, Paul would have used the word *eros*. *Eros* is not used in the New Testament. Here Paul is not speaking of *eros*, but of *agape*. *Agape* is that all-encompassing love that God first has offered to us, and that we are invited to return to God and to offer to one another. This is a love that for Paul is intertwined with a love of God in Christ. Paul is saying to the Corinthians: love and respect one another, and let the differences between you dissolve in the waters of your baptisms. Honor each other's gifts, and know that God is still a mystery. Love one another, because God loved you first.

My favorite story about preaching on this passage comes from a colleague who was dealing with some very negative behavior on the part of a member of her congregation. As she wrote her sermon in what she felt was a storm of inspired work, she had this one particular parishioner in mind. Her hope was that the parishioner in question would be so moved by the challenge of these words that he would abandon his harsh, critical, negative behavior and see the light. The preacher carefully crafted her sermon on love in the congregation so as not to point him out, but certainly in such a way that she felt he might

really get the message. Well, the appointed day came and the preacher delivered her sermon. She made sure she looked all around the sanctuary during the sermon, but also made a point of making eye contact with the difficult gentleman in question. She noticed he was nodding at several points. After church, he approached the minister and asked for a word with her. “Bingo!” she thought. “I finally got to this guy!” They stepped into a quiet corner at coffee hour and the parishioner said: “Pastor, that was one of your better sermons. Your words made a lot of sense.” By now, the minister was silently celebrating inside! The gentleman went on: “There are a whole bunch of people in this church who needed to hear that message, and I sure hope they were listening. Maybe they finally got the point.” Oops. Target missed.

That’s the thing about Paul’s eloquence—the message is so very clear, and we can so easily see the things that we’d like to fix in other people. The speck in our neighbor’s eye is so much easier for us to see than the log in our own eye. But Paul’s words are for each one of *us*. Agape love begins between each one of us and God, and is then to be shared with one another, and then to be shared in the wider world. This community of faith has such a great track record with the expression, sharing, and living of *agape*. This is to be celebrated! And as we can see when we look at the collage made from the collection of the spiritual gifts many of you identified in yourselves last week, there is a lot to love here!

Some of you have heard me mention Sister Nina Underwood, a former colleague. Nina is a Roman Catholic nun who served for 37 years in health care ministry in the Sudan. About a year and a half ago, Nina was invited to be part of a short-term famine relief team in Niger. The mission was to identify the babies and children at highest risk for starvation, and to provide high intensity nutrition for them in order to save their lives. Nina herself returned from this mission very thin, tired, and in need of recovery from a bad bronchial infection. She brought back many amazing photos and stories and added the sharing of her experience in Niger to her frequent presentations about her time in the Sudan, and her concern for the situation in Darfur. I was at a clergy gathering where Nina spoke of her time in Niger. So much of what she shared was so tragic. The suffering Nina witnessed there was beyond what most of us can even imagine. Infants and children dying of starvation, a complete absence of infrastructure of any kind, and the devastating effects of famine on the whole culture were described. Mothers with babies would journey for days on foot to come to the feeding stations, hoping to save the lives of their children. Sometimes, it would be too late. As the group listened to Nina, a sense of outrage and sorrow at the injustice, and a desire to help grew in the room. One person asked, “Sister Nina, hearing about his suffering, I feel overwhelmed and helpless. What can we do to help.?” Nina did not say “get in plane and fly to Africa,” though she might at another time. She didn’t say, “send money” or “write letters,” though I have heard her say those things. What she said was this: “Disarm your own heart. This is the beginning of peace and justice.”

It seems Sister Nina and St. Paul would be of one mind on the point of *agape*. As we journey together as members of the body of Christ, and as we sojourn with family and friends and seek to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world, let us do so with love. And though we may have the gift of eros in our life, and also the gift of philia—brotherly and sisterly love—as members of Christ’s body we are gifted with that very special love called *agape*, a love that is rooted in God’s love, a love that is disarmed and disarming.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love. May we ever embrace this as a community.

Amen.