

The Gift of Love
by Rev. Susan Morrison
4th Sunday after the Epiphany
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1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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.

Luke 4:21-30

²¹Then Jesus began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" ²³He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" ²⁴And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

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Love. It's such a big little word. It has many connotations. It can be used for something as trite as describing your passion for chocolate or icecream....Mmmm, I love chocolate cake with mocha chip ice cream. (Maybe that's not so trite!) Or it can be experienced by teens, who with hormones racing, fall in love for the very first time. Biblically, when love is passionate the word that is used is *eros*. Love can also connote the feelings shared between two good friends. Biblically, when love refers to friendship the word that is used is *filia*. Love certainly is that which sustains a long term relationship. It has been said that most couples think they are getting married because they love each other. Yet, the wedding ceremony suggests that love is the result of our commitment in marriage rather than its cause. Love is the fruit of marriage. (*Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 26.1, p. 20).

Then there is the love that Paul writes about to the Corinthians. This is not sappy, sentimental love that can be found on a Hallmark card. This is *agape* love. It is love patterned on the way that God loves us. It is unconditional love. It is a love that created each of us and a love that sustains us in our every breath and a love that will

companion us even at death into eternity.

Without this love, nothing is complete. All of the spiritual gifts that Paul wrote about in Chapter 12 are meaningless without love. If you have the gift of speaking in tongues but do it without love, your words are like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. You might have the gift of prophecy or the gift of knowledge or the gift of faith, but without love, these gifts are nothing. Even if you take the vow of poverty or become a martyr and have not love, the deeds are worthless.

I like to think of the love that is described in 1 Corinthians 13 as a foreign language, something that we have to learn, something that we have a whole lifetime to practice. Bob Edgar, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, tells this joke about a mother mouse that's walking across the field. The mother mouse has behind her, her babies, all the little ones that she loves so dearly. Everything is going great. It's a beautiful day. The mother mouse gets about half way across the field when a large cat comes at her from the other direction. So the mother mouse gets up on her haunches to protect that little ones from this cat. She looks the cat in the eye and says "Bow wow!" The cat runs off. Then the mother mouse turns to her little ones and says, "Now you know the value of a second language."

Today's lesson on love is like a second language to us. It possesses qualities that do not come naturally to us human beings. We know that language of loving those whom we like. On most days it's easy to love our spouse and our children. So far, I've never not been able to love little Emma, my grand daughter. It's usually easy to love our neighbor. But *agape* love calls us to love the unlovable, especially those who we dislike, even our enemy. It's a second language and Jesus is our teacher. We learn this foreign language by listening to what he says and by watching what he does. Jesus speaks this language fluently and lives it perfectly.

What does this love look like? Paul said this love is patient and kind. It doesn't want what it doesn't have. This love thinks about the other person more than oneself. It gives rather than takes. It doesn't keep score of the faults of another. It doesn't fly off the handle. It always looks for the best and hangs in there to the end. In other words, this love is like God's love and we practice it until we get it right.

Yes, love looks like, acts like, and sounds like Jesus Christ. Love looks like the one who sat at table with sinners. Love acts like the one who crossed social boundaries to heal people and set them free. Love sounds like the one who, in today's gospel lesson preaches an inclusive word that infuriates his own hometown friends.

Do you remember how, in last Sunday's lesson, Jesus returned to his hometown, Nazareth, and there, he worshipped in the synagogue where he had grown up. He was asked to read the morning lesson and to interpret it. The scroll that he was handed contained words from the prophet Isaiah. "The Spirit of our God is upon me" it read, "because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." And then Jesus surprised everyone by saying "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." It was quite a bold thing for Jesus to say. The whole synagogue buzzes with whispers and murmurs. There are nods and smiles. He speaks more. His listeners are amazed at what he says. They can hardly believe that this is this little boy who used to play with the wood shavings in his father's shop. "Imagine," they say to each other, "this is Joseph's son."

So far, so good. Why didn't he stop there? Why did Jesus have to spoil it all by telling that story from scripture about the prophet Elijah getting help from a foreign woman? There were lots of widows in Israel, but Elijah was sent to a widow of Phoenicia, a gentile nation, to an enemy of the Israelites. And then Jesus reminds them of another story about Elisha. Again, there must have been lots of lepers in Israel, but God sends Naaman, a commander of the army of Syria, one of Israel's bitterest enemies, to be cleansed and healed by Elisha.

The people of Nazareth are outraged. It almost as if Jesus went out of his way to insult them, to tell them that God's love was not for Jews only, it was for everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike. It felt like God had more regard for a bunch of heathen than for them. The gospel says they were so enraged that they drove him out of town and tried to push him off a cliff. It's a foreshadowing of what living and speaking love is going to cost Jesus.

But Jesus is the incarnation of God's love. Jesus is God's "show and tell" about love. And Jesus love will bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things, even death on a cross. And with Jesus' resurrection, we are reminded that God's love never ends! No wrong, no evil, no injustice, not even death itself can triumph over God's love!

I like the fact that Paul realizes that we are not born mature. When we are mere children of the faith we speak and think and reason like children. But as we mature in our faith, we grow in our understanding of what it means to love like God loves. You need to remember that Paul wrote these beautiful words of love to a church in conflict. They were wrangling with one another about what it meant to be the living body of Christ in the world. They were not treating each other well. The Corinthian church, like any church, anywhere at anytime, was full of both great division and great promise. That's why Paul wrote what he did to this fledgling faith community. He saw the promise and wanted to address the divisions that had the potential to destroy them. That is why, I think, he wrote so specifically about how love should and should not behave. However poetic his language may be, there is nothing sweet or sentimental about his intent. His "love smart" curriculum is meant to be challenging. (*Lectioary Homiletics*, Jan-Feb 2004, p. 3.)

What part of our life here at Holy Trinity needs to take lessons on love? When we are angry, can we learn how to treat one another with love so that people won't feel hurt and mistreated? Can we see conflict as healthy and embrace change with an attitude of love, knowing that it is for the good of the whole church? Can we better manage the way that we give and receive feedback, so that it will be given in love, always pairing a criticism or complaint with a positive suggestion or solution? Like the Corinthians, like churches down through the ages, we, too can mature in our understanding of what it means to love one another as God loves us.

I like the way Parker Palmer thinks about church as a school for souls. The missional question is not whether we will experience conflict in church, but how we can learn to do it differently than the violent, destructive ways in which the world does it. A church that is faithful to its calling as a school for souls will have love at the center of its curriculum. It should strive to be a safe and trustworthy school where the soul is welcomed and invited to show up, to speak its truth, and to make its claim on the living of our lives. (*Lectioary Homiletics*, Jan.-Feb. 2004)

And if the church does its job well, then its members become ambassadors of love in family constellations, in the work place, in the neighborhood, in our country and the world. The church then, as the body of Christ, becomes, as one scholar has suggested, a "student body" and we continue to learn about the art of love as Eric Fromm claimed when he noted in his book by that title that "love is an art./ It takes time, effort and training." (*Lectioary Homiletics*, Feb. 04, Wally Fletcher, p.3)

Isn't it lucky that we have a whole lifetime to practice and mature in our loving one another. As one commentator writes, "Simply stated, Christian love is not for babies. It isn't easy. It is like a foreign language. It is not what comes naturally. Paul has no attachment to the joys of what we call "young love." Love, of the kind described in Corinthians 13, takes every ounce of your maturity, hard work over a lifetime, waking up every morning asking God for the grace to help you love - despite others, despite yourself. (*Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 23.1, p. 21)

When I was serving the Ballardvale United Church in Andover, I met a woman who understood love as a mature Christian and lived out that understanding in the choices and decisions that she made. Sister Rejeanne Keeley was Director of the *Neighborhood in Need (NIN)* project in Lawrence. This program was established by Sr. Rejeanne and her order, the Sisters of Mercy. It collected and distributed large quantities of food through seven food pantries in the Merrimac Valley. Infant formula and baby food were especially solicited for the food pantries.

Prior to her initiating *NIN*, Sr. Rejeanne had been a teacher and then a nurse. She had been in the Sisters of Mercy order for 33 years. Constantly seeking to discern God's purpose for her life, she recognized the need to extend foster care to infants, children and teenagers in a growing population in Lawrence and so began such a program as an extension of other agencies. Love was at the core of her own personal decision to care for a very premature baby, for whom no home could be found. Born during the 28th week of pregnancy, little Maria needed round the clock care from someone with trained nursing skills. Sr. Rejeanne accepted the challenge.

Many months and much love later, Sr. Rejeanne decided to adopt Maria. But the love that St. Paul refers to in vs. 6 – that love which rejoices not in wrong doing but in truth – turned out to be a challenge. Because the truth for Sr. Rejeanne, which was the certainty that God’s love beckoned her to be mother, parent, and guardian to this beloved child, that truth became unsettling, difficult beyond what she could imagine, because the Sisters of Mercy order said “No. You cannot become a mother and remain a religious.”

Sr. Rejeanne was given the awful, awe-filled freedom to choose. This was *agape* love in action. This was a time of discerning truth. Ultimately, she chose to leave her order and become a mother to Maria.

Love, you see, when it imitates Divine love can bear, believe, hope and endure all things. Like Jesus, she was driven out of her community, and hurled out into the world. And like Jesus she passed through the midst of her order and went on her way. Her love was a mature love, a love that spoke a second language. She knew that with God all things were possible.

Faith, hope and love, my friends. These three. But the greatest of these is love.

So be it. Alleluia. Amen.