

Sermon 2.7.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Year C

Psalms 71 | **1 Corinthians 13:1-13** | John 15:1-17

It kind of feels like there should be a wedding this morning, doesn't it? I mean, we heard the magic words. 1 Corinthians 13. "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude." (v. 4-5a) We associate these words with white dresses and tuxedos and flowers and rings. These are words reserved for special occasions full of love and joy.

Which is actually kind of funny, because they weren't written for that purpose. They were written by Paul, who started a lot of new churches in the decades after Jesus left the earth. One of those churches was in a big city called Corinth. At some point in his journeys, Paul started to hear rumors – bad rumors – about what was going on back in that church. And eventually he wrote them this letter, to try to deal with all the problems they were having.

Apparently it had gotten really bad. The Christians in Corinth were fighting over who had the most impressive gifts. They were divided, with all sorts of power struggles. The church was intentionally excluding some people. They were suing each other in public and doing some horrible sexual things. They were fighting and bragging and full of jealousy and pride.

So Paul wrote these words that we've all heard before. Not because the Christians in Corinth were getting it right, but because they were getting it *so wrong*. Everything he says that love is not, that's what they were, and everything he said that love *is*, that's what they were *not*. These words we use at our weddings were actually written to try to fix one of the most dysfunctional communities and some of the most unhealthy relationships we can imagine.

And in the midst of all their arguments and divisions and issues, Paul tells them they've forgotten what is most important. They've forgotten what really matters most: love. The kind of love that God has for us, the kind of love we're to have for each other.

Now it's obvious at this point that Paul was not a Lutheran. I say that jokingly, since he wrote these words more than 1400 years before Martin Luther was even born. But Lutherans, we love to argue and debate – in fact, our tradition was formed by a group of theologians who took issue with the established church, and who spent a lot of time debating doctrine and theology and belief. Sometimes it has seemed like what Lutherans care most about is purity of doctrine and right belief, about perfect theology and precise language. And while these things are important, Paul tells us they're not what matters most. Love is.

“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.” (v. 1) There's a reason that none of you can name any famous cymbal players. There's a reason you don't have a CD at home full of the 30 greatest *gong* songs of all time. Cymbals and gongs are meant to accompany music, to accent music as part of an ensemble. But they don't carry the melody; they're not the *heart* of the music.

In life we can be brilliant. We can know tons of languages, have lots of degrees, work the high-paying jobs. We can plumb the depths of philosophy and push the boundaries of science. We can gain prestige and power and wealth, be well-educated and full of knowledge and wisdom. We can accomplish amazing things and gather incredible accolades. But if we don't have love, then we have nothing, and we're just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

It is *love* that matters most, and the gifts we all have – wisdom, knowledge, education, skills, power, wealth – they’re meant to accompany our love, to help us live out love towards others. They’re to be used in love’s service. Because it’s love, *love* that is the melody of life.

And it’s love that is meant to be the defining characteristic of Christians and the church.

(song?)

Often it seems that it is not *love* that defines people of Christian faith in our nation and world today. And so these words force us to ask deep questions. To ask: What is most important in our church? Have we done a good job of loving those around us – the people in our church community, the guests who visit us, the preschool who rents our building downstairs – or have we sometimes allowed ourselves to become unloving in our words and thoughts and actions? How can we better love the people of Narberth? How can *you* better love the family, friends, co-workers, and strangers around you? As a Christian, are *you* known by the people in your life for your love –or for something else?

You’ll notice that when Paul talks about love, he doesn’t just talk about *feelings*. He’s not talking about a sappy, superficial, sentimental kind of love. He uses the Greek word *agape*, the word used to describe God’s love for us: that deep, abiding, unshakeable, all-encompassing, irresistible, always-present, never-failing, I’ve-got-your-back, you’re-mine-and-I-love-you-no-matter-what kind of love. And when Paul talks about that kind of love, he doesn’t just talk about feelings. He talks about *commitment*. He talks about *action*. “Love is patient,” he says, and any parent will tell you that patience is an action, not a feeling. “Love is kind,” he writes, and kindness is expressed through our words and deeds.

Love isn't just about *feeling* loving towards people, it's about how we treat people, how we talk to people, how we think about people, even – *and especially* – in those moments when we *don't* feel loving. Love is caring for the person in need even though you don't want to, even when you're exhausted and tired. Love is sitting next to the family member or spouse in the doctor's office or hospital room when you're scared out of your mind. Love is staying up, waiting for the teenager to come home. Love is *not* taking advantage of someone emotionally or physically when they're vulnerable. Love is committing to act and behave differently for the sake of someone else. Love is the willingness for me to be inconvenienced or troubled so that someone else can be safe. Love is listening when another person speaks, even if you disagree. It's the refusal to treat someone else as anything less than a full human being, no matter who they are or where they've been. Love is treating our enemies with dignity and respect, it's serving even those who oppose us in the hope that one day they will become a friend. Love is putting the needs and well-being of another person before your own. It's not just a feeling. It's a commitment. Love is an action. As John Mayer sang, "when you show me love, I don't need your words; yeah, love ain't a thing, love is a verb."

Love is a verb.

It sure was for Jesus. For Jesus, love was expressed in action towards those around him. Healing the sick. Including those left out. Forgiving a condemned woman. Feeding those who were hungry. It was love that caused Jesus to come in the first place, as God looked upon the earth and saw our captivity to sin, and gazed upon our undeniable brokenness. It was love that called Jesus forth into the world as a tiny, helpless child. Love that led him to heal, teach, bless, and forgive. And it was love that led him to the cross, where Jesus laid down even his life for

our sake, so that we could be forgiven, healed, and free. In our Gospel reading today, just before Jesus was arrested, he said to his followers, “love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12b) And then he showed us what that love looks like by laying down his life for us.

Jesus is God’s love revealed. We have seen and experienced God’s love. And we’re able to love others because God has first loved us. (1 John 4:19) We’re able to love others because Jesus showed us how, and he gives us the strength to love – for love does require strength, so much more strength than hate or bitterness or despair – and Jesus gives us the strength to love each and every day. Like a branch connected to a vine, the love of God flows through us. God’s love is new for us each morning, thanks to a life lovingly laid down on a cross and picked up again in a tomb. And God’s love is made new through us, when we can choose each day to lay down our lives for the sake of loving those around us. May the world know we are Christians by our *love*. Amen.