

# “Faith, Hope, and Love”

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter

Psalm 98

Rev. John Wahl

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Ah, the wedding text.

This is one of the best-known and most well-loved passages of the entire Bible; not least because most of us have heard it read at nearly every wedding ceremony. The kind of love that is described here mirrors what we hope for couples as they enter new lives together: where love holds the primary position and never quits; the type of love that informs the way ways we treat one another and the world around us. Even those who may quibble with Paul’s other writings like this one, because it speaks to love.

For many of the same reasons, this reading feels appropriate on Mother’s Day, because we learn how to love from those who nurture and care for us as daughters and sons, nieces and nephews, grandkids, friends, and neighbors. Whether as helpless infants or needy toddlers, as rambunctious children or surly teenagers, even our testiest behaviors are met by a selfless love that always endures.

We are thankful for the mothers – and the other nurturers – that, in our lives, have shown us what patient, kind, and enduring love is like. The flowers, cards, and brunches that we lovingly give to mothers and care-providers this day are but small tokens of appreciation for the total commitment and sacrifice of faith, hope, and love that has been showered on us; and the greatest of these is, indeed, love.

We also know that the apostle was not speaking primarily, here, of either marriage or motherhood, but about that love which creates and maintains the miracle of community. In the preceding chapter, Paul compared the church to a body with many different parts, each of them – like the eye and ear, hand and foot – gifted uniquely to fulfill separate functions. It is in this great diversity that a body can operate in unity toward the common good.

Paul begins by noting that even if some members of the Corinthian church community were to exercise the most high-profile gifts – such as speaking in tongues or prophecy – apart from love, these activities would be nothing; they

would not contribute to the common good. Those gifts are merely self-aggrandizing and self-enriching demonstrations of power. Love is the practice which helps Christians ensure the gifts that the Holy Spirit offers to any congregation work to build up the body.<sup>1</sup>

The Corinthian church was not a homogenous body. Its members were not all of the same ethnicity, class, or religious background. This was not an easy gathering where people fell into step with each other because they share fundamentally similar lives, values, and experiences.

Still, Paul remains firm that this diversity is nonnegotiable. God has called this community to get along within its variety. His *ode to love* was not written in celebration of an already accomplished unifying love in the congregation. It was not a tribute to what existed, but a call to action. His was an intervention to instruct them on what had not yet come to pass.

What many modern translations of this passage fail to capture is that all these descriptors of love are verbs, not adjectives. Love is a collection of intentional actions. Thus, we might think about it along the lines of, “Love waits patiently; love acts kindly;” and so forth. The love that Paul is describing requires action; it is not a passive feeling toward each other.

In terms of what love “is not,” Paul says it is not self-seeking, short-tempered, and offensive. In other words, love does not hurt people; it does not damage prospects for authentic community; love does not impede the affirmation of another’s humanity. Love is the only means by which believers have a chance to live fully in the knowledge and fellowship of God. All other spiritual gifts and human achievements provide only limited access to that reality.

It may be helpful, here, to remember some historical context. In the ancient world, children were largely discounted and often regarded with disdain; Paul – saying that when he was a child he spoke, thought, and reasoned like a child – seems to play into a cultural trope that the ways of children are always immature, illogical, and unsophisticated. Our modern understanding of childhood is more nuanced; we view the little ones among us, instead, as whole, autonomous individuals; to act “like a child” is not necessarily a negative.

Likewise, in Paul’s day, mirrors would not have been nearly as reflective as they are today. Instead, they might be comparable to the experience of viewing a reflection in a window or polished spoon. While these surfaces can provide a

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Fowl from *WorkingPreacher.com*

general sense of the item being reflected, the image is not crystal clear. Paul suggests that the Corinthian's current view of the world is much like this. While they can grasp the outlines of truth, they simply do not have the clearest image right now.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, when we think about the patient, kind, and self-sacrificing love exhibited in our own communities, we must admit that it still, at times, appears childlike and blurry. We often fail to see diversity in shared gifts and backgrounds as a strength; we are still prone to act with envy and rudeness, insisting on our own way. Sadly, church communities are often notorious breeding grounds for conflict; whether about how we baptize and who is welcome at the table, or where we give our mission support and what color carpet is best.

And yet, because of the love that is nurtured, manifested and shared among us, the church also is able to accomplish great feats in the ways we feed the hungry, house the unsheltered, care for the elderly and young, heal the sick, and welcome strangers. Across the globe, congregations bring diverse people together as brothers and sisters, inspire amazing acts of compassion, and proclaim life-changing messages of hope and healing. Because God's love will never fail, we are taught and brought into a communal love that inspires us to act in love for others.

During this Eastertide season, we have been looking back to the stories of the early church provided in the New Testament books of Acts and First Corinthians to see how the story of the life, death, and resurrection of this man Jesus, God's beloved Son, inspired the formation of Christian communities that would be known for their love. These churches were comprised of all different kinds of folks: rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Gentile; a rich variety of people who – as we will be reminded in next week's Pentecost reading – spoke their own, native languages and came from all different backgrounds.

They were brought together as the church – and into an expanding network of local congregations – by the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit which descended upon them like uncontrollable forces of wind and fire. They did not possess material gifts of prestige or power; instead, we are told, young people would have visions and the elderly would dream dreams. Living according to the self-sacrificial love revealed by Jesus, they would gather together to pray and praise God, they would share meals and possessions, they would care for one another, seek out the lost and lonely, participate in healing, and welcome newcomers into their midst. In spite of the obstacles and opposition they often faced, these

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<sup>2</sup> Melanie Howard from *WorkingPreacher.com*

followers remained steadfast in the message Paul here proclaims: that in faith and hope, and undergirded always by love, they could use their unique and varied gifts to work for the common good. Instead of being ruled by greed and self-aggrandizement, they would make love a verb: acting with patience, kindness, and truth, with endurance and hope.

In our often divided and conflicted world, there is still a place for this kind of community, today. Like the promise of a new marriage buttressed by love, like a mother's unflinching care for her children, a community – in all its diversity – that embodies love can help bend the world toward mercy and compassion, healing and hope. We know love because we have been loved; we can love because love brings us ever more into the image of Christ, who was God's great gift of love to us. Thanks be to God. Amen.