

“What Is Love?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 14, 2026

Rev. Dr. John Wahl Psalm 139:1-2, 13-18 I Corinthians 13:1-7

A Curriculum of Love: Deepening our Love for God, our Neighbors, and Ourselves: Week Two

Yes, this is the wedding text. I listened to it being read just two days ago at a marriage ceremony, just as I have at dozens of weddings over the years. And why not? What words in scripture could better capture this moment of the joining of two people, two families, and two futures as these beautiful verses from Paul’s first letter to the Christian community in Corinth? – especially if you read on through the end of the chapter – “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three: and the greatest of these is love.” (v. 13)

Of course, Paul did not originate the idea that love has primary importance. Nor did Jesus when he identified love of God and neighbor as the greatest commandments. The centrality of love was embedded in Jewish Scripture centuries before Jesus and Paul walked the earth. Four times, the Torah conveys commandments to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and strength. A long list of examples of how God calls us to treat the people around us includes loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Paul, Jesus, and Scripture as a whole, however, don’t stop there. They anchor love in its most demanding contexts. Families, friends, neighbors, and coworkers can bring conflict, insults, disrespect, and even danger right into our face; it may corner us in a hallway or follow us into our homes; show up in church or at any other event. Our final verse today calls us to embody love’s best qualities in all contexts and in the face of “all things.”¹

But, contrary to its popular use in weddings, this was not originally a passage about romantic love, but of a radical love that enables individuals to imagine life in a community where unity and difference can co-exist. What is often missed, and perhaps actively ignored, is that this text was first written to people who were having a very difficult time staying together.

The Corinthian Church was not a homogenous body. Its members were not all of the same kind and ilk. This was not a comfortable gathering where people fell into step with each other because they shared fundamentally similar lives, values, and experiences. Their

¹ Frank Crouch from *WorkingPreacher.com*

fellowship defied conventional social boundaries of ethnicity, gender, age, rank, status, and life situation. While most of its members are converted Gentiles, it also includes Jews. Most of its members were from the lower classes, but some sat on the opposite side in rank and resources. There are slaves and free people in the community as well as people with different skill sets and gifts.

The diversity within this church generates both benefits and challenges common to any social group. Unfortunately, the diversity among the Corinthians had dissolved into discord and rivalry. Members divided into contentious groups. They took sides with some saying they are followers of one teacher or another. This was a community fragmented, rather than enriched, by difference.

Still, Paul remains firm that diversity is a nonnegotiable. God has called this community to be diverse and to get along together within it. Paul's "ode to love" was not written to celebrate the unifying love already accomplished in the community. It was a call to action. It was not a tribute to what is. It was an intervention to instruct on what had not yet come to pass.²

Paul underscores love's primacy for the Corinthians because it is the spiritual resource they lack most. Thus, Paul describes "the work of love" in both positive and negative terms. On the positive side, love is: patient, kind, and selfless. It involves truth-telling, fortitude, constancy, and tolerance. What many translations fail to capture is that all these descriptors are verbs, and not adjectives. So, they might be better translated along the lines of, "Love waits patiently; love acts kindly" and so forth. The love Paul describes is not a passive feeling; it requires action.

In terms of what love "is not," Paul says it is not self-seeking, short-tempered, or offensive. In other words, love does not hurt people. Love does not impede affirmation of another's humanity. It does not damage prospects for authentic community. 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 limited access to that reality.

Paul reminds his hearers that even if they try to hold onto them for dear life, prophecies end, tongues cease, knowledge gets erased by deeper knowledge, and, as the Beatles said, *money can't buy you love*. Paul asserts that no matter who we are or what we know or what we've done, we are far more ignorant than understanding of God's ways. The conflicts that are tearing apart the Corinthian community are not only fueled by their lack of love. Their lack of love is fueled by a pervasive lack of humility.

² Shively Smith from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Unlike the occasion of a marriage ceremony, Paul does not offer this passage to affirm an ethic already present in the community. He presents it as a way to introduce into the community an ethic that is necessary if they are to survive the muddy waters of difference and disagreement produced in their messy, interpersonal relationships.

The Corinthians were actively pursuing some of the things that Paul mentions in the opening verses such as speaking in tongues and knowing spiritual “mysteries.” There may be nothing wrong with such things in themselves, but if in the process people forget about loving their brothers and sisters, such things end up being worthless. Without love, it does not matter what budgets, buildings, or missional strategies we have. Such things do not give the church the shape that God desires. We may pursue various forms of piety, or proper doctrine, or activism in the name of justice. However, in our pursuit of these otherwise fine things, we must not forget that the church is called to be a community that practices love.

Paul never says that such love feels good, and this is where the typical use of this chapter goes awry. Such misunderstanding creates trouble not only for expectations regarding the day-to-day realities of marriage, but also in the church. Because of disordered assumptions about what love actually is, we often act as though the mission of a congregation is to gather like-minded and likeable people together. We think that in such a community it will be easy for us to love or, more honestly, to *feel the love*.³

Professing that *God is Love* is one thing, but what does it actually mean? After all, the love we are shown in this world is often far from unconditional. Many of us have experienced a distorted version of love that has left us with bruises on our hearts. When those who say they love us instead cause harm, it re-shapes the word “love” for us.

Thus, learning the differences between unhealthy and healthy love can be helpful. Where unhealthy love is controlling and manipulative, healthy love partners and guides with openness and consent. Where unhealthy love will use fear to dominate and have power over, healthy love empowers us. Where unhealthy love exacts revenge for mistakes, healthy love seeks to repair, heal, and forgive. Where unhealthy love is invasive, healthy love honors boundaries.

When it’s difficult to see healthy love mirrored in daily life, we turn to how Jesus showed love to others. We see how he empowered, invited, celebrated, healed, and accepted those in his life, even when no one else would. In his encounters with people who were often excluded and judged as sinful or unclean, he responded in shockingly merciful ways. His very death on the cross revealed how humanity tends to demonize, humiliate, and destroy. It is God who brings back to life, forgives any debt, and sees us through the eyes of mercy.

³ Brian Peterson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

As Siri Stroman, the author of this *Curriculum of Love* series, says:

True love carries no conditions. We don't have to be, act, think, or do anything in order to be loved. If we did, it would be a conditional love, one we are capable of losing. It's quite difficult for us to accept that God's love isn't conditional. Just think of the conditions the church has put on us over the centuries: You are only saved if you are a Christian, belong to the right church, are baptized, confirmed, attend church regularly, believe the right things, do the right things, etc.⁴

Some people might react negatively to the idea that God's love is unconditional. Does that mean our Heavenly Parent will accept anyone? Does that mean nothing we do or believe matters? Is that fair? Sometimes, we want mercy for "us" but vengeance for "them". This makes it clear that we sometimes have a distorted image of God, of ourselves and of our neighbor. We will get to those latter problems in the coming weeks. For now, we can focus on what the most mature, healthy, and transformative version of love could be.

Maybe that's difficult thing for us to do. Maybe we've never experienced a love that is so uncontrolling, so willing to let us live our uniquely individual lives, so understanding of who we are as beloved children of God. We may find it hard to imagine embodying that kind of love.

For now, let's allow our imaginations to stretch the boundaries of God's love for us and how we might actively practice love within and as a community. When our heart breaks at the grace that is showered upon us, we know we are getting close. Once again, look at how Jesus behaved towards others, especially those in need of love and mercy. While we can so often judge, accuse, demand, and put people in boxes marked with many "shoulds", Jesus releases. He embodies a kind of healthy love few of us have consistently seen.

If any of this happens to resonate with you – if you still have trouble fathoming the expanse of unconditional love and the depths of God's grace – I encourage you to spend some time this week trying out the spiritual practice printed in your bulletin. Write down, or simply list as a part of your prayers, what you imagine God might say to you; what God may want you to know about what love is. As the prompt suggests, light a candle, get comfortable with the silence, and simply listen.

Love – as it is most pointedly described to us in the scriptures and through the life of Jesus – is patient and kind; it is not resentful nor does it rejoice in wrongdoing. It bears and believes and hopes and endures all things. Thanks be to God for this love that is so strong and true. Amen.

⁴ Siri Stroman, *A Curriculum of Love*