

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany  
Sunday, February 2, 2025**

**“The Greatest of These Is Love”  
I Corinthians 13:1-13**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

As you listened to our Epistle Lesson, from I Corinthians 13, I know what you were thinking: is someone getting married? That passage is, of course, a favourite at weddings. You know the scene well: a nervous Best Man steps to the lectern, pulls that crumpled sheet of paper out of his rented suit, suddenly realizing that he had not yet read it over; he looks down at the page, and begins: ‘ahem, [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)’...

By comparison, our rendition was positively award-worthy!

Now there’s nothing wrong with including this passage at weddings; I mean, it’s a natural fit. But there is a downside. For one, the passage doesn’t tend to get very much attention at weddings: the couple is too busy gazing lovingly at one another, and the congregation is too distracted by other matters—like wondering, ‘Will the Best Man will be better prepared with the rings?’ That’s why I Corinthians 13 is often read, but rarely heard. And also, since it’s read far more at weddings than anywhere else, many people conclude—as it turns out, incorrectly—that this text is primarily about romantic love. So it may come as a surprise that, its original context, I Corinthians 13 is not romantic at all.

In fact, I think St. Paul would be rather shocked that this text became a mainstay for blissful weddings, since he wrote it as an intervention for a congregation experiencing conflict—really, a congregation in crisis. I Corinthians 13 is one part of Paul’s correspondence—Paul’s series of letters—to the Christians at Corinth, a Greek city west of Athens. And this congregation was very much in trouble. The problem wasn’t that they lacked any abilities or gifts; to the contrary, they were—by all accounts—a remarkably gifted group of early Christians. The problem was that these very gifted Christians regarded each other as rivals, treating each other like competitors, “refusing to share, scorning [each other’s] spiritual gifts, boasting in their own gifts, seeking recognition for themselves, and jockeying for [influence] in the church” (Galloway).

For his part, Paul wrote to them and responded in different ways to these different problems; but here, in our I Corinthians 13, we see the heart of Paul’s

response, which is the “practice [of] love” (Galloway). In our Lesson, Paul makes a case for Christian love by describing the necessity, the character, and the endurance of love (cf. Galloway); that is, Paul explains why love is needed, what love looks like, and how long love lasts.

In the beginning of this passage, Paul makes the case that love is necessary, essential, needed—because “all [our] actions are empty apart from love” (Hutson). Remember, the Corinthians were spiritually gifted people, so Paul makes his point by imagining “increasingly lofty gifts” (Hutson)—then stating that without love, they’re all meaningless. ‘If I can speak in angelic languages,’ Paul says, ‘but without love—then I might as well be a cowbell. If I’m a prophet who understands every matter of faith, but without love—then I’m nothing at all. If I give away everything I own, the shirt off my back, but I do it without love—then it doesn’t mean anything.’ This is how Paul lays out the necessity of love, declaring that love is the one thing that, without it, nothing else we do matters.

So Paul tells these spiritually gifted Corinthians that spiritual gifts are empty without love. The Corinthians, however, may well have thought that, not only were they the most gifted people around, they were also the most loving; but in what comes next, Paul—shall we say—suggests otherwise. When we hear “love is patient; love is kind,” we’re immediately transported into Happy Wedding Mode, but—in its original context—this was a sharp criticism of the Corinthians: everything Paul says love ain’t, the Corinthians are; and everything Paul says love is, the Corinthians ain’t (cf. Jones). Love does not envy or boast; but the Corinthians sure do (3:3, 4:7; 5:6) (Hutson).

It’s important to realize this—how this was a controversial letter written to a church amid real conflict—because this helps pluck these words out of the realm of sentimentality and plop them right down into the real world, where people don’t agree and feelings get hurt. This is not a poem about some sort of syrupy love; it’s an appeal to love for a community that badly needed to hear it. This comes out of the rough and tumble of real life, and the result is an account of love that’s “active, tough, [and] resilient” (Galloway).

And in the original language, it’s very vibrant, too; it’s less about what love ‘is,’ and more about what love ‘does’—what the practice of love looks like. “Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have. Love doesn’t strut, Doesn’t have a swelled head, Doesn’t force [its way] on others, Isn’t always ‘me first,’ Doesn’t [run out of patience], Doesn’t keep score of the sins of others” (Peterson). Now this was not the way the Corinthians interacted and treated each other—so when they heard these words,

they couldn't help but recognize that this kind of love was sorely lacking in their community.

But of course, the Corinthians are not alone in their failure to embody this kind of Christian love. Really, I don't think there's any congregation anywhere that could look at 1 Corinthians 13, and honestly say, 'Oh yeah, that's us!' I mean, who could possibly hear about all these ways that love acts, and be like, 'Check, check, check! Done and done!' None of us embody love like this: in fact, we can fall so far short, we can become discouraged, resigned to thinking that this kind of love is just unattainable (cf. Irish).

And it's then that we realize that this love is Christ's love; this is a vision of the love that God revealed in Christ, the one who set aside privileges and glory, who "emptied himself" and "humbled himself," "to the point of death [...] on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8). We don't love like this; only Christ does. Yet Christ's love for us is what inspires us to share in this love, to learn to love more like Christ. Our love for God and for each other is always our response to God's prior love for us in Christ: "We love because [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:19). That's our starting point: "None of us [can] reach the heights of [Christlike] love that Paul describes," yet—with gratitude for God's love for us—"[a]ll of us have [the ability and the] room to grow" in love (Jones).

And what comes next is Paul's encouragement to embody this kind of Christlike love. Paul explained the necessity of love and the character of love—and then concludes with the endurance of love, how our love will outlast anything else we do. Everything—even the greatest spiritual gifts—will end, Paul says: prophecies and tongues and knowledge—all that "will cease" and "come to an end" (v. 8). All of it, except one thing: "Love," Paul says, "Love never ends" (v. 8); "Love never dies" (Peterson). St. Paul teaches that love is "a present reality [that reveals] the age to come" (Irish)—in a sense, love is a foretaste of heaven, and the one thing we get to bring with us.

As one Presbyterian minister puts it: "There is a beautiful irony in [...] that the one thing that lasts forever is the love that [we give] away. Even though no person can make complete sense of all [their] experiences in this world or see clearly what lies beyond this world, each person can trust in the permanence and persistence of divine love lived and experienced in human life. In Christ, [we] are known and chosen in divine love. In an anxious world that grasps for the permanent, [what's] eternal is given through the experience of love. When the church gathers to celebrate the resurrection at the time of death, [we] have the opportunity to witness to the truth that the legacy that matters most is love"

(Galloway). It turns out that, though 1 Corinthians 13 has become a mainstay of weddings, it could just as well have become a mainstay for the Christian funeral.

Can it still be read at weddings? Absolutely. In marriages, we need to try to embody Christlike love—but we also need to try to embody this Christlike love in congregations and families and friendship and communities, inspired by Christ's prior love for us: "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. Love never ends" (vv. 4-8). Thank God. Amen.