

## What's Love Got to do With It?

Second only to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, this passage is the most well-known and often-quoted chapter in the Bible. First Corinthians 13 is often used at weddings, sometimes at funerals and is otherwise known as the “love chapter.” Even in translation from the Koine Greek, the prose from this chapter flows like poetry, and the message seems so peaceful, that by the time we hear, “but the greatest of these is love,” we give a nod of agreement and feel that God is in His heaven and all’s right with the world. But there’s more here than first meets the—ear.

Corinth was the capital city of the region of Achaëa in southern Greece. Even in the time of the Early Church, Corinth was an old city, burned to the ground in 145BC by the Romans, then rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44BC. Because of its location on the Isthmus of Corinth, a strip of land joining the Peloponnesus to the Greek mainland, Corinth was a center of trade and travel, linking Athens and Asia with ports to the west. In those times, ships were hauled up and over the rocky ridge of the isthmus on great sledges, low runners drawn by teams of work animals. The people who lived in ancient Corinth were from everywhere; Roman soldiers and officials, traders from both Greece and the East; sailors from across the ancient world; a sizeable Jewish population, and; a mixture of slaves and freedmen, philosophers and hucksters. There was a ship-building yard in Corinth, as well as a great temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love—but not the kind of love Paul was talking about in I Corinthians 13.

Because of the shipping and commerce, Corinth was a rich city. Because of the sailors, soldiers and tradesmen it had a reputation for drunkenness and debauchery. Corinth was known as a party town. A third-century Greek writer noted that whenever a Corinthian appeared in a Greek play, he was portrayed as a drunk. According to the Greek historian Strabo, the Temple of Aphrodite employed more than 1,000 temple prostitutes, who came down from the Acropolis in the evenings to practice the world’s oldest profession. The word, “korinthia/zesthai,” became a part of the Greek vernacular—“to live like a Corinthian”—synonymous with drunken and immoral behavior. Corinth was an ancient version of a Gold-Rush boomtown, or perhaps San Francisco’s Barbary Coast.

In the midst of all this happy throng we find an outpost of the Early Church, itself a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, of rich and not-so-rich, people from different backgrounds, cultures and countries. They aspired to follow the teachings of Jesus, surrounded by this Wild West sort of town. In I Corinthians 6, Paul reminds the congregation that not too long ago, they had been such rabble-rousers themselves.

This morning’s reading is, of course, from Paul’s letter to the church there in Corinth. And reading a letter—or hearing it read—can be compared to listening to someone while they have a conversation on the phone. While you may be able to guess who they’re talking to, it’s a little harder to completely understand or grasp the full conversation. You’re only hearing one side of it. And so it is with this letter.

From Paul’s side of the conversation, we can tell that the church in Corinth was rife with dissention, which is something that can happen when you’ve got folks who are experiencing something that is new and exciting, and that they are passionate about. These new Christians had

a lot of enthusiasm. They were excited over a new way of living. Perhaps they had tried the wild ways of Corinth and become disillusioned, wanting more out of life than partying and Roman holidays. And they had achieved a certain degree of success. But something was missing. They argued a lot. They argued over who was their leader—beyond Jesus. They argued over what foods to eat. They even argued over whose spiritual gifts were more important. I Corinthians 13 follows Paul's discussion on the importance of spiritual gifts, in which he held that all spiritual gifts were equally important to the Body of Christ—that is, the Church. Using the analogy of a physical body, Paul argues that all parts are necessary and no one part can exist without the others, and so too, the Body of Christ. We need each other, and no one is more important than anyone else. No one's gifts are less necessary than another's to do the work of the Kingdom. God has passed out the gifts with this in mind, brought us together as the Church, and God knows what He's doing. But for the church at Corinth, something else was missing. And so Paul concludes his discussion on spiritual gifts with the words, "but earnestly desire the... gifts, and I will show you a still more excellent way." Then in this morning's text he begins to show what was missing in the Body of Christ at Corinth—the love of God, revealed through the Holy Spirit.

Now the Greek language can in some ways be more specific than English. For instance, the Greek for "love" can be; "phileo," meaning love for friends or brotherly love—Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love; "erao," meaning romantic love, from which we get words like "erotic," just to name two. As a matter of fact, there are over three hundred words to describe different kinds of love in ancient Greek literature. But the word that Paul uses for love in this morning's text appears in the New Testament and almost nowhere else in Greek literature—agapao, or agape, meaning the love that God has for each of us. And this, says Paul, is the missing ingredient from all of the Church's efforts.

Still referring to spiritual gifts, he says that speaking in tongues—whether earthly languages, or even angelic, heavenly languages—without agape, God's love, comes out as noisy gongs or cymbals. It's interesting that gongs, cymbals and sounding brass or trumpets were used in worship of many of the Greek gods. Unless it originates with agape, speaking in tongues is as empty as a pagan ritual. So too, Paul points out, are all the other spiritual gifts; gifts of prophecy and knowledge, even faith strong enough to move mountains. If the source of any of these is anything other than God's love for us, they are meaningless. Even acts of kindness—giving to the poor, the homeless—or a sacrifice of one's own body to be burned must be inspired by the impetus of agape, or they will ring hollow. The missing element to all our efforts is God's love. And that's the key, the key word—our. When God's love is the driving force behind all we do and say and are, the efforts become not ours anymore, but God's. But time and again, we get it backwards. We try, we come up with our own ideas, rather than asking God to guide us. We recognize spiritual gifts that God has given us, and suddenly they become our gifts—not God's anymore. This is my possession, my toy and I think I'll use it—here, in this way. And then we look for approval from others for these great efforts, for these marvelous capabilities we have, forgetting our heavenly Father who made us and the gifts in the first place. As Jesus said in John's Gospel, "apart from me, you can do nothing." We forget that, and then we get into all kinds of arguments, just like the folks in Corinth so long ago. "Apart from me, you can do nothing."

Perhaps with these words in mind, Paul then begins to describe God's love for us, this agape, this missing ingredient. Agape, he begins, is patient, kind, and not jealous. Author and Presbyterian minister Frederick Beuchner defines jealousy as "the consuming desire to have everybody else as unsuccessful as you." If you lack God's love in your life, you can become jealous. Paul goes on. God's love never acts unbecomingly. Another way to put "unbecomingly" is "ungraciously," which Paul follows with "does not seek its own way." The Greek word for "grace" or "gracious" and the word for "charm" are the same. Those who allow God's love to guide their actions are not insistent on having their own way, but instead enter into a gracious give-and-take in their interactions with others. Then Paul says agape is not provoked—as in, "provoked to anger." If you allow God's patience and kindness to prevail in your life, not seeking your own way, but knowing that God's goodness will prevail, you're going to possess a sense of calm that doesn't resort to anger when things seem uncertain. Anger needs a recipient. God's love, on the other hand, is free. And it does not take into account a wrong suffered. The word here is "logizesthai," (logi-zestay) meaning "to store up," as an accountant stores up figures on a spreadsheet to maintain a record. God's love does precisely the opposite. Rather than holding a record of grudges and remembering hurts, agape lets them go. "Christian love," says theologian William Barclay "has learned the great lesson of forgetting." Then Paul says God's love doesn't rejoice in unrighteousness, or perhaps, takes no joy in any misfortune of others. On the rare occasion when you top the hill on the freeway to see that guy who cut you off a couple of miles back pulled over in front of the highway patrol's flashing lights, does it make you smile? I wish I could say I've never smiled over such a thing. Often, it's easier to rejoice in others' misfortune than to rejoice in the truth. And sometimes we're not so anxious to see the truth prevail as we are to see someone who's wronged us get what they've got coming to them.

Paul then says that God's love bears, believes, hopes and endures everything, and it never fails. Agape never fails. It never fails us. It holds us up and holds on forever. God, in His great love for you, believes—in you. He has the greatest of hopes—for you. And God's love will see you through—everything. Always. In his descriptions of God's agape, it seems as if Paul has been looking at a picture—of Jesus. To allow this kind of love to permeate every aspect of our behavior is not easy, but God himself showed us what His love for us looks like in human form—in the person of His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

In contrast, Paul says these spiritual gifts are temporary. They won't last. They'll pass away. The spiritual gifts God supplies us with are for the moment, for the time at hand, but we won't always need them. Because this earthly life is only a part of God's bigger picture, God's eternity, God's plan. Using the analogy of a child, Paul speaks of the way he talked and reasoned when he was little. It was all he could do back then. And it was okay.

Have you ever watched adults talk to a baby? Babies have the capability to make an otherwise mature adult look so silly. "Oh now, how's the itty bitty baby? Oh, yes!" If you were to use baby talk with adults it would be—ridiculous. But it's okay with little ones. The baby responds, sometimes, with a smile a giggle, or maybe a laugh. It's the way to talk to babies. And little ones talk that way, too. They're just learning. Their minds and brains are developing. That's our perception of God's purposes while we're here on earth—learning, developing. Paul says our vision now is also like looking through a mirror. Corinth, among other things, was famous for making mirrors, usually out of bronze, sometimes bronze mixed with tin, which provided the

viewer at best with an inferior image compared with today's mirrors. But even today, you only see your face, or maybe your head when looking through a mirror—not all of yourself. And the image is the reverse of the way you look to other people. Genesis describes us as being made in the image of God, but in this world, we are and we understand God's perfection—just like Paul's mirror analogy—in part, dimly, perhaps even backwards from the way God truly is.

Because of our imperfect understanding, the best we can manage is a partial sharing, a partial witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the here and now, we can only grasp a portion of what God has done for us. Therefore we only offer a “partial prophecy” based on the partial understanding we have. But it won't always be that way. One day, we will be in the presence of God, face to face with the Eternal, and we will understand fully. As Paul says in Romans 8, the things we encounter in this life “are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” And here in verse 12 of chapter 13, Paul adds that we will know, even as we are known. But that last phrase—even as I am known—is in the present tense. Although our full understanding of God is still to come, God in His infinity love, knows us fully, right now. His agape love surrounds us, sustains us, and sees us through.

Tina Turner, in the biggest hit of her long career, recorded a song whose words are from the point of view of someone who has dared to love and been hurt. In the song, “What's Love Got to Do With It?” she tries to separate the physical attraction she feels for a man from the emotion of romantic love. “It's only the thrill of boy meeting girl,” she sings, “You must try to ignore that it means more than that.” And while this song addresses the vulnerability of love of the “*eros*,” or “*eros*” kind—romantic love—I think the vulnerability which the lyrics describe parallel the vulnerability that Christians face when we allow God's agape love to guide our lives. Because if we love, if we offer God's agape to others, there is no guarantee that others will reciprocate. And now, Paul writes, faith, hope and love abide. Of the three, love is the most risky. It's risky to hold out your hand to someone, because they just might not return your grasp. They may not thank you. They may, in fact, turn away, leaving you with an empty, outstretched hand. Jesus opened his hands, only to have nails driven into them and a spear to pierce his side. But because he reached out and opened his hands, his heart and his life to others—with God's agape love—that was not the end of the story. God's love overcame the nails, overcame the spear, the crown of thorns, the despising shame. God's love overcame death.

It goes against human nature to allow agape to permeate your thoughts, your words, your actions. It's hard to remember that every one of your abilities are not yours, but gifts from God, entrusted to us for a little while. It's not easy to let go and allow God's love to overcome—everything, especially when dealing with other Christians, or when the going gets tough. But Jesus reminds us, “for in [this] world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” So, what does God's love have to do with it? Everything.