

I want you to imagine for a moment, someone who loves you: a friend, a parental figure, a sibling, a spouse or partner, a child, even a pet. If you are able, think about the ways these persons (or other beloved creatures!) express their care and concern for you. How are they present? How do they make you feel valued? In what ways do they allow you to be comfortable just being you? How are they consistent in your life? How do they lift your spirit?

If you are like me, when I think about these persons and creatures, I am overwhelmed by their goodness. I am SO appreciative and SO amazed by the blessing and gift each one is to my life.

The Apostle Paul lets us in on an even bigger, even more amazing idea: the love and value we find in our most meaningful relationships is but a fraction of what we find in God's love for us. God's love is SO big, SO remarkable, SO transformative, it exceeds even our best examples of human love.

Paul tells us that when we cultivate a right relationship with God – being mindful of God's presence, seeking to live into God's good purposes for our lives – we begin to faith that God's got us. Our faith leads to love, an expression of care and compassion for God's creation. And active in love, we begin to hope – expect, make ready, be alert, prepare – for God's inbreaking world. We **faith** that God is with us. We **love** others in the presence of God. We **hope** for all that can be.

Sure, Paul is a curmudgeon, and he would benefit from a few sociology classes if he lived in 2022, but when Paul speaks of love, I think we ought to pay attention.

Paul has a dramatic conversion experience, one that awakens him to the radical, intense nature of God's love. And that love rocks him to his core. The same zealous pursuit he put into persecuting the earliest Jesus followers is transformed into spreading the idea of a God who loves creation. To be sure, Paul is intense, and over-zealous at times, and too often modern thinkers misplace the intention of his intensity and zeal. Paul's value, Paul's purpose, Paul's entire existence is rooted in his identity as a beloved child of God. For Paul, God's love for each one of us is a common denominator, though there's nothing common about it – God's love is universal.

But in Corinth, Paul is ministering to a congregation that doesn't see God's love as a universal denominator, but rather they see this denominator as common, ordinary, cheap, vulgar, even. You see, Corinth is full of congregants who believe they need to be more than enough.

Some bring lavish meals for Communion as less fortunate neighbors can't even afford bread. Some speak in tongues, not as an authentic expression of ecstatic connection with God, but as a demonstration of privilege. Their ramblings help make them insiders, possessors of knowledge newcomers can't have. The Corinthians are seeking to infuse the same social status markers in this community of faith as they would in the Roman world.

How grand, how eloquent, how authentic can our flowery expressions and praises of God really be if they are not rooted in love? How filling, how welcoming, how transformative can our tables really be if they are not rooted in love? How meaningful can our ministries really be if they do not invite neighbors beyond our circle to experience God's love for themselves?

Without love, our prose is jumbled, our songs are a cacophonous racket, our works are a mere checklist.

Paul reminds us that God's love undergirds and steers the value of our gifts, possessions, and actions, and not the other way around. The righteous, faithful disciple doesn't praise and honor God in order to hoard God's love; the righteous, faithful disciple praises and honors God in ways that make God more accessible and abundant to others.

For Paul, our purpose begins and ends with love. In modern times, Paul's words to the Church at Corinth are often read at weddings. I think that's fine, though I am not sure Paul is the first person I'd consult on marriage, seeing as how he found it to be a bit of an occupational hazard. Paul is not really speaking about romantic or individual love, though some of it certainly translates to individual relationships. Paul's talking more about how God's love for each one of us infuses our individual lives, and serves as a catalyst for creating communities that reflect the affection, grace, and creativity of God. I think Paul is helping us frame how we can put the universal denominator of love to scale in community, and indeed global settings.

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.

As I hear Paul's words, this comes to mind: I am but a vessel. And I can promise you that there are days, especially some in the last week, where I have been envious, and boastful, and arrogant, and rude. I have

certainly insisted on my own way, and my gracious, have I ever been irritable, and perhaps a little resentful, too! And I am not sure if this counts as rejoicing in wrongdoing, but I certainly cheered all those Tarheel turnovers in Winston-Salem last Saturday night.

I am, just like each of you, an emotional creature. I believe the clinical definition is human. It's the strangest thing though, I have this energy that runs through me. I believe the clinical definition is love. And no matter the mood of my vessel, there's something strangely consistent about my love, I think because it's rooted in the One who created us. Somehow, someday, the love within each of us is always stubbornly and wonderfully present and consistent.

Some nights, I insist on my way – I think my daughters should wear their pajama bottoms on their legs and not on their arms. And as the time passes, my vessel can get very irritable, flummoxed even. But it can't conceal my love. I rarely remember pajama battles in the morning. But not a moment goes by when I don't delight in last night's hug, kiss, high-five and I-love-you.

In this era of pandemic, my vessel has lots of resentment. I'm mad, and annoyed, and tired that we haven't been able to be and do Sardis Baptist Church in the ways we prefer, experiencing the routines that are familiar, with the methods that felt more effective in simpler times. And yet somehow this desire for manufactured efficiency hasn't tempered or reduced this community's palpable sense of love. If the broadband collapses, or we get Zoom bombed this morning, it'll be a distant memory in a week. But somebody will express some thought, steeped in spirit, that will stay with us long after today – an expression of love and authenticity.

We faith that God is with us. We love in God's presence. We hope for God's future.

I think the challenge for us this morning is to identify those things in our communal living that both inhibit and strengthen our receptors for love. Ours is not a tradition of tongue-speaking, but are the words we offer used to hoard or to share God's love with others? Our table is less frequent in these virtual times, but are we preparing dishes to fill our own spirits, or to help share God's abundance with others? We call ourselves the other kind of Baptists, still adamant that all might express liberty of conscience and live with soul freedom. Do we faith that God's universal love for us can stir the unhindered authenticity of the spirit, even when, especially when the spirit's expression differs from our own? Can we faith that our love for one another is the foundation for our traditions, legacies, and expressions, and not the other way around?

Love is in this place, Sardis Baptist Church. Paul warns us, "Don't be the place that says, 'We have God's love and you can't get it.'" Paul encourages us to be the kind of place that says, "God's love is all around us. Come on in and get some, too!"

Faith, hope, and love, abide, good friends, and the greatest of these is love. Paul charges us to pursue love. Let us begin such a pursuit, not by speaking in tongues, nor by preparing exclusive tables, nor by hitting every high note; but instead by with simple acts of generosity, compassion, and hospitality to our neighbors, over and over again. For if, as Paul reminds us, love never ends, we have a lasting resource to guide us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

**Love**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Fourth Sunday After Epiphany, 1-30-2022**  
**1 Corinthians 13:1-13**



a spiritually  
progressive  
community  
of faith