

Love is a way of being
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1 Corinthians 13

Last week I preached on Love, specifically the Way of Love, a Rule of Life that is a theme for the Episcopal Church this year. However it is critical that we understand and define what this love is. Right on cue here we have the famous poem on love from First Corinthians that is our Epistle for today.

Now the first thing we must set aside is the idea that the love we are talking about is what I have heard described as ooey, gooey romantic love. This is not the love of Valentines Day and sentimentality. That is all fine and wonderful, but this is different. This love is something far deeper and far more profound. So please set aside all thoughts of romantic love like we see in most weddings and look at something far more profound.

It is also important to understand that God as a loving God was not invented by Jesus or Christianity! It is in the psalms and in the prophets, you may not believe that but it is. Yes we see an angry God portrayed in some OT passages, but you will notice that Jesus never ever refers to any of those passages! In fact the only passage he quotes from Leviticus is the command to love your neighbor. When asked what are the two great commandments, they are both centered around love. Love of God and Love of neighbor.

The importance of the incarnation, the cross and resurrection is all based on Jesus showing us this love. This is what is meant when some theologians say Jesus was incarnate, walked among us and died on the cross not to change God's mind about us, but to change our minds about God. His incarnation was to show us, to teach us that God is love. The Trinity shows that love is what flows between all three that are one in unity. Jesus was trying to move the first century world away from the image of the angry God sitting in heaven with his finger on the smite button.

The important thing that is essential to understand is that Paul is first of all using the word agape, which is the Greek for the love of God for all of creation. This is not mere friendship, which is philio or desire, which is eros. There are after all these three different words for love in Greek. Paul is specific and in fact what is also important is to realize is that Paul is using love as a noun not a verb! Love for Paul is more than an action love is a way of being. It is ultimately what God is. Let me say that again, love in this passage is a noun, not a verb, it is a way of being, not something we do or just feel.

Last week's reading omitted a very important phrase at the very end and we need to put that back in for today's sermon. At the end of last week's reading Paul writes, "I will show you a more excellent way." Then he begins his exposition on love. For Paul the way of love is not just a better way, but it is the more excellent way. Now one problem is

that many people really do not want to hear this message. Sadly many want an angry God, one that punishes those who sin. Bishop Gene Robinson said the following in a sermon on January 24 2016 at All Saints Pasadena:

“It’s funny isn’t it? That you can preach a judgmental and vengeful and angry God and nobody will mind. But you start preaching a God that is too accepting, too loving, too forgiving, too merciful, too kind...and you are in trouble.”

When Rob Bell wrote his book *Love Wins* he also took on this idea of God as a God of love and wrote in this book that if God really is love, than the idea of eternal damnation in a place called hell just doesn’t work. He was rewarded by 2000 members of his 4000 member church walking out the door. The other 2000 got together and fired him. Fired for preaching a God of love instead of a wrathful God of judgment. I find that stunning and incredibly sad.

However it can be hard to follow this way of love. Acting, like the people in Corinth, which is how much of our world acts, is easy. If I hate the other, I don’t have to deal with them. I can dismiss them. Think of what a challenge it is to live the description of love in today’s passage. This way of love is hard, challenging work. It is challenging because then we have to accept and love our neighbor, no matter who that neighbor is because God loves them and Jesus tells us we must love them.

Oliver Clement wrote: When we receive and empathize with the face of the “other” (especially the suffering face), it leads to transformation of our whole being. It creates a moral demand on our heart that is far more compelling than the Ten Commandments written on stone or paper. Just giving people commandments doesn’t change the heart. In the end, *Christianity is not a moral matter until it is first and foremost a mystical matter*. Commandments and laws may steel the will, but they do not soften the heart—or create soul—like one authentic I-Thou encounter will do. Thus, we have produced an awful lot of “mean” Christians, which we must admit is Christianity’s present public image.¹

The antidote for all these “mean” Christians is to put into action the Way of Love that Bishop Curry has urged us to accept.

One of my favorite theologians on Paul and his letter is Gordon Fee. Fee suggests we put Christ or God in the place of the word love. Listen to how that reads?

1Cor. 13:4 God is patient; God is kind; God is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. God does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6God does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

¹ Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (New City Press: 2013), 47.

Then Fee issues a challenge. He says what if we put our names in that place and then tried to actually be those qualities? What if we all showed the extravagant love to the world that God shows to us? What would the world be like then? Would that bring the kingdom a little closer. I think it would. This is actually what Bishop Curry is asking us to do.

So to cure for all the divisions that were plaguing the church in Corinth Paul gives them this message of love. So what advice do we think Paul we give to us today in the 21st century. I really think he would send just about the same letter. I think that in what we are reading in Corinthians is a call to a new way to be church. A way that doesn't divide, that respects the dignity of every human being and calls us to live the Way of Love that Jesus first taught some 2000 plus years ago. It is that simple and it is that hard. So the challenge I issue you this morning is not to be loving, but to be love. That is what I believe Paul would say to us today. Amen.