

January 29, 2023
I Corinthians 13:1-13



I received an email from Apple on Thursday, and I was grateful to receive it, because it gave me some instructions about how to better express my love. The heading of the email proclaimed, *this Valentine's Day, show them how you feel with a gift from Apple.* Well, if it takes a gift from Apple to show someone how you feel about them, I have openings on my calendar for counseling appointments, because you need relationship help. The email went on to add, *say "I love you" with something new. Products sure to make their hearts flutter.* Truth in advertising – I wear an Apple watch that my family gave to me, and one of the reasons why I wear it is because of its practicality. I can track my steps each day and use other apps that I find helpful. I find it especially helpful, and practical, because of a heart app that I have loaded onto it. While this Apple product doesn't cause my heart to flutter, sometimes my heart does flutter, but that is because I have a condition known as atrial fibrillation, which causes my heart to beat out of rhythm. While I am grateful for the practicality of my watch letting me know when that happens, let me add this – there is nothing practical about love. In fact, loving others might be the single most impractical act you do in life. While businesses, such as Apple, desire to monetize our love, let us remember that when it comes to loving others, do not think practically.

Love is not practical, and the ways in which we are instructed to love by the Scriptures is definitely not practical. Loving your neighbor as yourself is not practical. Loving your enemies is not practical. Love will lead us to do what flies in the face of reason and will lead us to do what will seem crazy to others.

This morning, we continue the series of messages *Faith, Hope and Love*, from I Corinthians 13:13 – *and now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.* Even out of that great triumvirate of faith, hope and love, even in that majestic trinity of values that form the foundation of our faith, love stands head and shoulders above the others.

Thus far in this series, I have offered two messages on faith, two on hope, and now we come to the topic of love, and are talking today about how love is what matters most. We are talking about a love that is greater than any other type of love, we are talking about a love that is greater than any other expression of love, we are talking about a love that is greater than any other definition of love that has ever been presented to humanity. It's okay to love that gift that someone gave you, such as an Apple watch. It's okay to love your favorite sports team. This morning, however, we are talking about a love so powerful, so astounding, so amazing, that the ancient Greeks coined a word to provide us with a language of such a love. It is a word that describes the kind of love that is different from any other kind of love. That word is *agape*, and it describes the amazing, powerful, love of God, a love we are called to emulate every day of our lives.

The Scripture text is, of course, I Corinthians 13. When we speak of love, what other passage of Scripture carries the sheer beauty and gravitas of that passage? There are many beautiful – and challenging – passages about love, but I Corinthians 13, to me, is simply stunning in its beauty and its power.

So, let's read that very familiar and very beloved passage now –

I Corinthians 13:1-13 –

- ¹*If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.*
- ²*If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*
- ³*If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*
- ⁴*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.*
- ⁵*It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.*
- ⁶*Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.*
- ⁷*It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*
- ⁸*Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.*
- ⁹*For we know in part and we prophesy in part,*
- ¹⁰*but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.*
- ¹¹*When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.*
- ¹²*For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*
- ¹³*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

Full disclosure moment – this morning, before I was very long into my day, I realized I had already failed to live up to much of what we find in this chapter. I wish that Paul, beginning with his list of the characteristics of love in verse 4, would not have started with *patience*. I am not a patient person. I wake up impatient. I go to bed impatient. I am one of the least patient people in the world. I am not always kind. I often envy. I do not always model the other characteristics that he lists.

In fact, I often do not. But I assume we are all in that same boat, to some extent.

I have said before that definitions matter. Not everyone defines every word in the same way, and that is very true when it comes to love. Love is a Biblical word, but it has its non-Biblical connotations as well, and that is one of the reasons why we have to define what we are talking about when we speak of love. I believe that the way in which the Scriptures define love – and certainly the way love was demonstrated by Jesus – provides us with a very specific view of love. So, let's take a closer look at how the Scriptures present love.

1. Paul wrote these words to a church whose context was conflict, teaching them that love is greater than what divides us.

A lot has changed since Paul's time. A lot has changed since Paul put pen to paper and gave us these beautiful words. A lot. Obviously, the early church did not have a projector, screen, and computer. Or lights. And if they had, Peter or one of the other disciples could have laid their hands on that technology when it malfunctioned and healed it. I sometimes think about laying my hands on this technology, but it's not to heal it. But in other ways, not so much has changed, such as the conflict that rages among humanity. We must never take I Corinthians 13 out of context, and the context is one of conflict. Human nature has remained essentially the same forever, and one of the ways in which human nature has remained the same is in the reality that we just don't get along with each other very well. Cain and Abel's conflict set a template for humanity that we seem unable – and perhaps unwilling – to break. It was a conflict that pitted brother against brother and then quickly became a conflict that engulfed all of humanity.

And just because we are the church, it doesn't mean that we are guaranteed to do better. The context of Paul's beautiful words in I Corinthians 13 is a reminder of that reality. A little earlier in this letter, in chapter 11, verse 18, Paul writes this – *I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you.* Paul was being a bit sarcastic when he wrote those words, and more than a little ironic,

because, simply put, the church at Corinth was a mess. A big mess. Paul, in another passage, makes mention of a partial list of the problems in that church and it is not a pretty list.

And yet, isn't it interesting to realize it is out of that context that we are gifted these amazingly beautiful words. It is a context that is not characterized by love and grace or any of the higher qualities to which we are called, but is noted for its conflict. Imagine – if the church at Corinth had been in great shape, if it had been a place where everyone got along, if it had been a place that epitomized the spirit of Kum Ba Yah, we might not have this passage, and what a loss that would be. The context of the church at Corinth reminds us that, sometimes, it is out of the most difficult of circumstances, it is out of the most conflicted of environments, that some of the greatest beauty arises.

Paul offered these words to the church at Corinth as a bar set high, high enough that we would look up to something greater, rather than looking around at all that divides and separates humanity. I said, early in the pandemic, that I had believed that if a global challenge confronted the world, humanity would bind together in a way that we perhaps had seldom, if ever, seen before. I believed we would come together and be united in confronting the challenge or challenges that sought to pull humanity apart. The pandemic was that opportunity, but we did not rise to the occasion, at least not in the way we all had hoped. I am an optimistic person, and I do not like to yield to pessimism, but the failure of humanity to come together during the pandemic to the extent that I had hoped we would definitely put a dent in my sense of optimism. But I continue to hold to the promise that what Paul tells us is true – we can overcome our differences, not by sweeping them under the rug but by acknowledging that in spite of our differences, we can be better, and we can move beyond what divides us. We do not have to be divided by everything, as so often seems to be the case today. One of the great fallacies of our time, I believe, is the growing sense that many people have that says, *if I differ from you, if we are on a different side of the aisle politically or religiously, I can't have any connection with you or walk with you in any way.* I think that's not only wrong; I think that is

tragic. That doesn't mean we overlook matters of great importance, but what Paul does is, to lift our vision higher, and that is much needed.

I have read I Corinthians 13 countless times over the years, and it wasn't until the other day that one of the phrases struck me in a way it never had before. In verse 1, Paul uses the phrase *if I speak in the tongues of men or of angels*. Now, I know I'm not the sharpest of theologians, but until Monday, it had never occurred to me that Paul was not speaking poetically or descriptively as much as he was making a comparison. The tongues of men, or humanity, are often harsh, critical, hurtful, judgmental, diminishing of others, and I could go on and on with the negative adjectives that so often characterize our speech and our actions. And that was the type of speech – and the type of actions – used so often in the church at Corinth and in the culture of the time, and it is a type of speech and a type of actions that continues today. This is Paul's way of saying, *you can be so much better than how you are behaving!* You can, he says, *use the tongues of angels* to speak in a way that is uplifting, kind, encouraging, and containing a host of other positive and uplifting attributes. To use the tongues of angels is to use the words and to encourage the kind of actions that recognize the spark of divinity in each person, as every person reflects the image of God. Part of what Paul is telling us, in making this comparison, is that we have a choice when it comes to love. We can choose the higher way of love, or we can choose the lower, and more-oft trod path of something that is less than love. And we see enough of that in the world, don't we?

I think these are such beautiful words that they speak powerfully to us, but when we consider our national and international context – which is very much one of conflict – they have particular power and a very strong resonance. We read these words and say *amen*, let us remember that the word *amen* means, *let it be so*. When we say *amen* to Paul's words, we are saying, *let it be so Lord, and I will pledge myself to help it to be so*.

2. *Love refocuses, redirects, and reprioritizes.*

Love can change our perspective so quickly. In October of 1989, Tanya and I became parents for the first time. It's amazing, isn't it, how quickly your life changes when you become a parent. In a moment, everything about life is different because you have this beautiful, wonderful gift of life with which God has blessed you. We were two months into parenthood when I was sitting at the kitchen table in our apartment one evening, paying bills. We were living in this big, old house on Main Street in Lawrenceburg that had been converted into apartments. It was a great place to live, except in the winter, because it was cold and impossible to keep warm. In that month of December, our gas bill for our heat was more than our rent. It was ridiculously high. It was higher than what we pay for a month of heat today, 33 years later. It was probably equal to what we would pay now for five or six months of gas bills. As I wrote out the check – we had these things called checks back then – I wondered if the gas company would notice if I postdated it by six or eight months. The financial math just didn't add up, even with my creative math abilities. That math didn't add up for a long time, and it was tough. But we were willing to make whatever changes were required of us. That's what parents do, because we love our children. I was ready to take on a second job, sell some of my possessions, or whatever was needed, without hesitation.

Love refocuses, it redirects, and it reprioritizes. Love reminds us that we are not the center of the universe and that we exist for a purpose greater than ourselves. Love reminds us that we are called to sacrifice and called to care about and care not just for our children, not just for our family, not just for the people to whom we are naturally drawn, but for every kind of person.

What this means, in part, is that we cannot wait until we *feel* love, because by Paul's description, love is much more than a feeling. Now, I should add that I have nothing against feelings, especially when it comes to love. I like the positive emotions that are part of love, but if we wait to express love or wait to treat people with love until we feel some kind of emotional pull, we will not often live up to the Biblical definition of

love. Love is an act of the will, and sometimes, it requires a very strong will in order to love in the way we have been called to love.

One of my favorite parts of ministry is officiating weddings. Everyone loves a wedding, and they are beautiful events. I have officiated many weddings over the years, and it is inevitable that someone, usually in the middle of the ceremony or during the reception, will lean back, cross their arms, shake their head and mutter, *they have no idea what they're getting into*. It's not always a negative statement, but one of experience. When you pledge your love to someone you don't know what's ahead. And, truth be told, it's probably better that we don't know what's ahead of us. We love the ceremonial aspect of love. We love the idea of romance and the beauty of a wedding, but love contains a great challenge as well because we don't know what love might ask of us, and anyone who fails to understand that love is much more than just emotions will struggle to make it longer than the first weeks or months of a marriage. Love is an act of the will, and it is to make a conscious choice every day to live a life based on love. It is an act of the will to love, especially on the days when we don't *feel* like demonstrating love. You don't have to *feel* love in order to demonstrate love.

3. To love is to be vulnerable, and it's hard to be vulnerable.

I'll be honest with you and tell you that I'd liked to say, *I'm going to quit right there*, because I do not do vulnerable. And perhaps you do not do vulnerable either. In fact, my first draft of this manuscript had that point and nothing after it. Nothing. Just blank space on the paper. I do, though, have a number of paragraphs in this version, but they are separated by double spaces because I didn't know if I was going to actually use any of that information, so I left them in a random order. I would read it and think to myself, *I don't know if I want to use that*. *I don't know if I want to say that*. I left those passages in my message, and last night, as I prepared to print my final draft, my word processor crashed just as I prepared to hit the "print" button. I decided that if none of that information had been saved, I would leave it out of my sermon,

but evidently, auto-save is a very dependable feature. This morning, as I was looking over this point, I still didn't know what to do with the information I had written, so I thought I would extemporaneously offer the words that go with this final point.

I have no idea how I come across to people. I don't know if I wear my struggle with vulnerability on my sleeve or not, but I will say this is a really strange and difficult experience for me, standing up here in front of a group of people, talking about vulnerability, when I do not at all like to be vulnerable. I am someone who is, by nature, very reserved, which is another point of irony for me, as I am in front of a group of people every week. One of the issues confronting every minister is the question of how much you get into the things with which you struggle, but I will go ahead and say this – I can stand up here and speak as eloquently as I am able about the importance of love, and the reality is, I can be a real jerk. The truth is, we can all be jerks. We can talk about the beauty of love, all the while failing to live up to love. Paul wrote so beautifully of love and he had his detractors. In II Corinthians 10:10, for example, we read *for some say, "his letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing."* Paul was aware that he did not always live up to his own words. As a minister, one of the comments I often hear is a version of this – *oh, church. I used to go to church, but I don't any longer. The church is full of hypocrites and I don't want to be around a bunch of hypocrites.* Sometimes, on the days when I am acting less charitably, I will say in response, *okay. Can you give me a list of names? Who are those hypocrites? Do you know all those people? Do you know for sure that they are all hypocrites? Am I a hypocrite? I'll answer the question for you. Yes, I am.* Here's the reality – everyone is a hypocrite. Everyone. None of us live up to all of the ideals we profess. We just don't. And I read the articles and see the news reports of ministers and faith leaders who fail to live up to their public words, and whose actions are very disappointing and very discouraging. But the reality is, we all fall short, and that's part of the vulnerability we face. People see that we fall short, and people see that we do not always live up to our words. That doesn't mean, however,

that we don't continue trying. For me, part of the calculus I had to consider as I entered vocational ministry, and in remaining in ministry these many years, is the realization that *I'm not up to that. I can't live up to those words.* Well, the good news is, for me, nobody else can either, but we are still called to aim for that goal.

One of the realities of love, then, is this – we are vulnerable. We leave ourselves open to the charge of being hypocrites, which hurts. We leave ourselves open to the reality that we will disappoint people, and we all disappoint people, and that hurts. We leave ourselves open to the reality that people will do and say things that hurt us, because to love others is to leave ourselves open and vulnerable to hurt. And I don't know if you are like this, but I tend to have a wall around my heart in order to protect myself. Sometimes, I manage to take a few bricks out of that wall and lower it down a bit. Sometimes, I add more bricks to that wall, because I can be very wary, and I can be overly cautious and overly protective. I don't want to take that risk. I don't want to leave myself vulnerable.

Then, more than anything, what always calls me back, and what calls all of us back, is reading the gospels, and reading the story of Jesus, and being confronted with the person of Jesus, and being confronted with the vulnerability of Jesus. He did not have to do what he did. In Philippians 2:1-11, Paul writes about the vulnerability of Jesus, and does so in a beautifully poetic way, as he does in I Corinthians 13. Six or seven years ago, I preached a sermon on Philippians 2:1-11 and the title of the sermon was *The Other Love Chapter*. In verses 5-8 of that chapter, Paul writes, ⁵*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:* ⁶*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;* ⁷*rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.* ⁸*And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!* Jesus subjected himself to what he did not have to subject himself to. He did not have to do that, and yet did.

To love is to be vulnerable. And when we see the example of Jesus and understand the call that we are to live like Jesus and to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, it means we are to walk in a way of vulnerability as well and that is really, really difficult to do. But Paul says, *faith, hope and love. These three remain.* You can take everything else in life away, and when you take away all those things away, what rises to the top of the list of what matters most, is faith, hope and love. Out of those three, there is still one that rises above the others, and that is love, and that is, truly, what matters most.