

The Greatest of These is Love

1 Corinthians 13

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I mentioned last week that I'm getting ready for a three month sabbatical. Next week will be my last Sunday with you until late August. I'm grateful for this gift of time. My ultimate goal is to come back refreshed and ready for our next season in ministry together.

I'm looking forward to the chance to pause, to take a breath, to have some deadline free time. Bodies need rest. This teaching is at the heart of our faith. The command to honor the sabbath is one of the big 10. In the Exodus story, Worship of God and not working are linked. They are almost the same. So sabbath, downtime, leisure is central to the spiritual life.

My family and I will be away from Northfield for much of the summer. Through family, we have a place we can stay in Florida for a while, and we'll be leaving our sweatshirts at home. Because of this, my garden which I love will be lying fallow. I'll plant a cover crop for the sake of enriching the soil, but I won't be asking it to produce anything.

I've been thinking about what it means for the soil of a church to lie fallow for a season. This sabbath time for me will be a sabbath of sorts for the whole church. There will be one pastor here instead of two. Pastor Abby and Pastor Bob will be here over the summer but rarely at the same time. We have only the essentials planned. Worship every Sunday, responding to pastoral emergencies, Pilgrim Point retreat, food trucks on Tuesdays. That's about all. Maybe this whole body will be able to take a breath this summer after five busy years. We will produce the fruits of ministry again very soon and hopefully there will be more energy in the soil for our work.

We're are in the middle of three weeks with the Apostle Paul. Paul is a practical guy, always trying to put out fires and solve problems. His problem is that the church in Corinth is a conflicted, divided mess. This is a diverse community, Jew and Greek, rich and poor, male and female. There are different factions who want to follow different people. There are a few people who are being selfish, who are not honoring other people in the community, who are not sharing their bread with others who are hungry. The work of the community has become a battleground for rank, importance and worth. What is happening in this church in Corinth is very, very human.

Paul's responses to this chaos and conflict are brilliant. His responses are a resource wherever human beings are in community and struggling with conflict. Last week, our focus was 1 Corinthians 12 where Paul says, "you are one body with many members. Each member of the body has gifts to offer." Paul affirms the ability of a community to hold together diverse people and perspectives, but within a metaphor, the body, that assumes that each member is working for the good of the whole. Then Paul does takes sides in the conflict. He sides with the

powerless and affirms that they, especially, are a part of the community. At the end of chapter 12, Paul says, "I will show you a still more excellent way."

Then he launches into 1 Corinthians 13, a chapter on love, on all that sends us towards others, to care and to give.

For Paul, love is the power that holds human beings together. Love is the power that holds everything together. Paul says, "speeches without love are just noise. Wisdom and knowledge without love are meaningless. The greatest achievements without love are worthless." There has to be an element of outwardness in human action for it to matter.

This outward focus, brings out the best in us as human beings. Patience, kindness, restraining our natural selfishness, acting not only for our own interest, but for the good of the whole. But then Paul starts saying things that cross into the realm of the eternal. This outward focused power is something more, something deeper for Paul. Love bears all things, love endures all things, love never ends. And, of course, faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love. Paul is talking about God, and God is the power that motivates the best of human behavior.

There are a couple of Biblical images for God that are at the center of my faith, holding it together. The first is from the tiny letter 1 John where the letter writer says, "God is love." Paul and that letter writer could have been friends. The other biblical image for God comes from the call of Moses in Exodus 3 where God has just appeared to Moses in the burning bush and told him to go to Pharaoh. Moses asks, "when the people ask who sent me, what shall I say?" God answers, "Tell them, "I AM," or "Yahweh," has sent me to you. Scholar Walter Brueggemann says that the word Yahweh in Hebrew comes from some form of the verb "to be." "God, then is the power to be, the power for life, the power of being, the power of newness."

You can then put these two images together. The power of being, the power of newness, the power of life itself, is love. And, I find it very interesting that as Quantum physicists look into the heart of reality, they see space not as a lonely void but filled with connections, and relationships. Scientists are discovering that relationship seems even more basic than the atom. At the heart of reality, from a scientific perspective, and from the perspective of an ancient religion is a power that is focused outward: to give of itself, to reach beyond the self. It doesn't seem to be a stretch to say that love is what is most real: a power that sends us to give of ourselves, to care for others beyond ourselves. I agree with Paul Love never ends because I think it is at the heart of all that is real. I agree that love endures all things. Love is greater than faith and hope because what ultimately trust is love. What gives us hope is the power of love.

At the heart of what we do as Christians, is try to stay open to the power of love, to stay centered in it. This is what worship should do. This is what prayer and meditation should do.

Because of this passage I've been paying attention this week to moments where I feel like love is indeed at the heart of everything. There have been a few moments like this, and in those moments all of my other thoughts and stressors were pushed away.

The most powerful moment was yesterday. Yesterday we were in Des Moines to celebrate my mother's 70th birthday. My family, my sister's family, and my mom's three brothers and their spouses all traveled in for the event. It is hard to imagine siblings more different from one another than my mother and her brothers. One is a retired successful business executive living in Los Angeles, one is a retired computer programmer living in Seattle, and the other brother lives in Northern Minnesota, has been a long haul trucker and currently works for a dock making company. My mother is a retired elementary music teacher. Their personalities are as varied as their vocations.

The family is divided by politics and religion, but my Aunt Jeannie made clear that no one was to talk about politics. Religion was talked about, but I only talked about it when I had to and I handled my responses with care.

This birthday celebration was rooted in life review. The grand piano in my parent's living room was covered with photo albums and there was always someone with an album in their hands. After lunch, as we were sitting at the dining room table, my mother and her brothers started telling stories. It started with them asking about the trip they took after their father died. My grandfather, a baptist minister, died of Lou Gehrig's disease when my mom and her brothers were ages 8-15. The summer after, my grandmother decided they needed to take a trip out west. My uncle, at age 15, was the driver. He remembered leaving Salt Lake City in the middle of the night to cross the Great Salt Flats in the middle of the night with the windows down because that was the only time people drove across the desert. My mom remembered throwing snowballs at a pass in Glacier National Park while my uncle impatiently revved the car engine at them telling them it was time to go. They visited family they didn't know they had, and people in California asked them if the sun shined in Minnesota because their skin was so pale.

They told stories of their life with their dad. They told stories of the how they tormented one another, of the ridiculous things they did. Then they told stories of the months before their dad died and the day he died. They asked questions of one another. What did you think was happening? What did you know? They talked about how no one would talk about it. There was care and compassion for one another. We started reaching for tissues, but the stories kept coming. Finally, when the stories had run out, one of my uncles got up to get a tissue. He wiped his eyes, sat down and said, "whew, that was hard work."

I asked my mom later, "have you ever talked like that about your dad dying?" "Not together," she said.

It was like that was the work they had gathered to do. It was like love had been patiently waiting for a moment where some more healing could happen, and yesterday was the moment. It was life, "beginnings, endings, deep sorrow, some regret, and also true joy and gift. And from my vantage point, I saw love and care in the center of it all. I saw a love that bears all things. I

saw a love that endures all things. For me, at least, for those few hours, love pushed away everything else. Love was shining so brightly in the middle of that table. It was all I could see. It was all I could feel.

This wasn't the only moment this week or lately when love was revealed, but it is the most powerful. In these moments when I see and feel love so clearly, I feel calm, centered, maybe even reassured? I'm reminded that love is still here, in the heart of things. Moving around me, moving through me, acting in spite of me. I feel relief, hope, a renewed sense of trust. I start to believe, to trust in our story, that no matter what happens, I cannot get away from this love.

When we live in times of conflict and chaos, and when we live through times when others hurt us and we are wounded and angry and we give up on our neighbors, I think in part we give up on love. We lose faith in love's presence, and we certainly lose faith in love's power. How can love still be with me when I'm hurting this badly? How can love possibly be powerful enough to overcome all that is doing harm.

To conflicted and divided human communities, Paul speaks of love. He says more than simply "be loving towards one another, come on." He says love is our home. Love is what is ultimate. Love is more powerful, more enduring, even more common than human selfishness. At the center of everything is a power that sends us towards others to give, to care, to heal and make whole.

Paul reminds the church in Corinth and the church in every time, to stay open to the power of love, this love is the power of God, this love is at the center of it all. This love can heal and piece us back together. This love will change what we see, change how we see one another, it can change how we act. It seems to me that this is what divided human communities need. May it be so. Amen.