

February 6, 2022
Slow Church
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
“On Love & Freedom”
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1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (New Living Translation)

If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever! Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture! But when the time of perfection comes, these partial things will become useless.

When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.

Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.

In ancient Greece, the city of Corinth was a bustling metropolis. During the first century, the population was estimated at about half a million people. To put that in context – a bit larger than present day Greater Victoria!

Because of its location on a narrow peninsula, Corinth boasted two commercial harbours – leading to a constant influx of travellers, merchants, sailors and pilgrims passing through its ports.

People intermingled from all walks of life – there was a mosaic of cultures and a variety of religions – including numerous pagan temples. Life for many was richly comfortable – they were educated and affluent – with the primary pursuits of profit and pleasure.

The Apostle Paul, saw this as an excellent location to plant a church – where the Gospel Good News could reach and influence numerous people from diverse backgrounds – and then be further transported to the world beyond as travellers continued on their journeys.

But as you can imagine, such diversity in a budding congregation led to many challenges and disagreements. Learning to live and worship together in harmony, was a constant struggle. Paul nurtured them along for about 18 months, before hitting the road again himself. But without his presence and leadership, things quickly fell apart.

And thus we have the two epistles composed by Paul, responding to complaints and questions he's been sent by various church members. In return Paul provides instructions and encouragement to the congregation at Corinth – calling them to account for their actions and at times, even scolding them for their poor behaviour.

While we don't have any record of how these epistles were received, they very well could have been originally heard with gasps of shock and anger – even shame and embarrassment. But most certainly they were not immediately seized upon as an ode to romantic love to be immortalized at every subsequent marriage ceremony.

As we continue the exploration of our text from 1 Corinthians chapter 13, this is crucial information that we need to know!

Taken out of this specific context of internal battles within the early Corinthian Church – these ubiquitous verses we've been studying about 'Love' become the watered-down words of innumerable secular weddings – rhapsodizing to starry-eyed couples about their tender feelings; 'Love is patient – love is kind - love is hopeful, love never gives up'.

We must remember, Paul is not writing sappy cards for Hallmark! He is building communities of faith based on the service and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

And his letters are meant to guide and correct the early Christians – to inspire them with the Story and remind them of the Way that they have chosen to follow; a Way and a Story, deeply rooted in Divine love.

So how does this Divine love – differ from the euphoric giddy flush of human love? The sweaty palms, racing hearts and swirling hormones experienced by those struck by Cupid's arrow?

How is it different from the 'falling in love' 'head over heels' 'wanna spend the rest of our lives together' kind of love that leads two individuals to stand up together in front of family and friends – and pledge a covenant to each other while listening to these ancient words from Paul?

The actual love of which Paul writes, is not a love that bubbles up in our hearts and flutters in our stomachs as our entire system is flooded by feel good neurochemicals like dopamine and oxytocin.

Paul is describing a tenacious love that is a conscious choice – about how to act in community. Love, that is reflected in our behaviour and our actions towards others.

He is speaking neither of a relationship between individuals nor a romantic feeling – but of a love that is purposeful, determined and resilient.

Love that is a deliberate decision, to put one's own self, one's own needs and one's own agenda aside, in favour of what is best for everyone.

A love that is always, in pursuit, of the common good.

Love, that is a harbinger of God's kin-dom.

And as he describes this specific and very sacred type of love, Paul is not just pulling examples out of a hat.

When he says 'Love is patient, love is kind' it's because the people of Corinth, have been **im**-patient and **un**-kind.

When he writes 'Love is not jealous, or boastful or rude' – it's because certain Corinthians **have** been jealous **and** boastful **and** rude. Paul is writing in response to accusations and disputes between church members – accusing one another of such un-Christ-like behaviour.

This motley assortment of diverse congregants that comprise the church at Corinth – the former pagans, Gentiles, Jews – the culturally diverse Greeks, Romans, Ethiopians – each think that their way is right – that their understanding is the truth, that they know what's best.

Like noisy gongs, they endlessly clammer – 'My faith is the strongest!' 'This is how we must worship' – 'I'm the most generous' - 'I'm the one you should listen to.'

Wrong wrong wrong! Cries Paul. You've got it all wrong!

You're missing the point!!

This is not Christian love – this is pure selfishness!

I can't help but liken the Corinthians misunderstanding of the concept of 'love' to a great number of people's misunderstanding of the concept of 'freedom.'

As protests and occupations continue 'championing freedom' across our 'free' country, organizers claim they will stay 'as long as it takes for rights and freedoms to be restored.'

I wonder how Paul might weigh in on the topic of freedom?
What response would he write to the current events in this country?
Wrong, wrong, wrong! He might tweet. You're way off the mark! You're missing the point!
This is not freedom – it is pure selfishness!

Freedom does not harass.
Freedom does not intimidate.
Nor does freedom wave symbols of hate and oppression.
When it does these things it is nothing more than a noisy horn blaring.

Freedom, is not the same as a 'free-for-all.'
Freedom is not 'anything goes.'
Freedom is welcome to demonstrate openly, but freedom does not target the rights or choices of others.
Freedom opens doors. It does not **block** the way – into hospitals, homes or businesses.

Freedom does not strew nails in the streets, ram cars into crowds, or hurl throw rocks and eggs.
Freedom is hard won – but freedom does not hurt or gloat.
Freedom brings not chaos and disruption but peace and unity.

You cannot assert your freedom, by infringing upon mine.
Freedom is for everyone – equally.
Ultimately freedom, does not just benefit individuals, but liberates the collective whole.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul holds out a hopeful vision of holy community that is possible when differences are tolerated and people learn to co-exist, because they choose actions and behaviours grounded in love.
He speaks of Love as a way of being, that reflects God's kin-dom.

Paul further reminds us – that love is not shaped like a heart, it's shaped like a cross. It involves sacrifice. It carries responsibilities.
And it puts individual needs aside for what sustains the whole community.

So too does freedom.

Love, Paul suggests, cannot be depleted. The more it is given away, the more love expands and grows. Maybe this is not so much a paradox, as it is an example of the ongoing mystery of God's eternal abundance.
And in a similar vein, freedom should ripple outward to ease strife and anxiety rather than compound it. Freedom too should reflect the sacred promise of God's kin-dom – where the vulnerable are protected, the poor are uplifted, and tyrants and bullies are knocked from their thrones.

Sacred love and holy freedom go hand in hand. And through the grace of God, are ours for the choosing. Both require our intentional commitment and active participation.

In this season of Epiphany as we strive to see things in a different light – may we be receptive to God's revelations illuminating our lives – and may our behavior and our choices be Spirit-led to help bring about God's kin-dom of love and freedom for all peoples.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer:

Holy and Living God;

We give thanks for the evidence of your Love in this world.

Through our relationships and experiences –

And the opportunities we have been given to extend that love to others.

We are grateful to be able to participate in sharing and demonstrating Love – even when it is challenging.

And so we also give thanks for your unfailing love for us – even when that too at times must be challenging!

In all our imperfections and errors, we keep trying and practicing and learning.

And you just keep loving and offering grace, forgiveness and freedom.

We help spread your love by naming these names and concerns – with the hope that your healing and liberation will touch and transform lives:

We pray for a peaceful resolution to the protests taking place across our country – that voices will be heard and dialogue engaged in ways that are respectful and don't cause harm.

That leaders and protesters will see the bigger picture – and consider how their choices and actions impact others –

We pray for the safety of police officers and innocent civilians trapped in the middle.

There is truth and passion on both sides of the divide – may compromise be achieved so that everyone can move forward together.

We continue to pray for our dedicated and increasingly traumatized health care workers – who faithfully show up shift after shift to care for those who are suffering and dying.

And we pray for those in their care – that they may experience compassion.

We think of those in our own community and congregation – our friends and our families who are unwell in body, mind or spirit....

We continue to pray for Trevor...and Bruce....for Marjorie....Phyllis & Gary...and all those whom we hold in the silence....

May your abundant and ever-expanding love flow through us God – to bring light and liberation to places where this is darkness and confinement.

We trust and pray, in words spoken by Jesus who exemplified and embodied your Love incarnate:

Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kin-dom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil, for thine is the kin-dom, the power and the glory, forever and ever, amen.