

1st Corinthians 13:1-13
What endures.

Ruskin Falls, May 12, 2019
Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday of Easter

TEXT (*English translation: NRSV*)

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

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. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

(1)

The Christians in Corinth are divided. They're divided over many matters.

They're divided over the meaning of baptism and over how the Lord's supper should be served. They're divided over how to understand Jesus's resurrection. They're divided over what is proper attire for worship. They're divided over the importance of circumcision. They're divided over mixed marriages between Christians and non-Christians. They're divided over the Christian importance of marriage generally. They're divided over proper relations between partners within a marriage. They're divided over what constitutes sexual immorality and how to deal with it. They're divided over the role of women in the church. They're divided over qualifications for church leadership in general. They're divided over how much they're paying the preacher. They're divided over what makes for a good sermon. They're divided over the nature of prophecy (which in the New Testament church means uniquely inspired preaching). They're divided over how to order their services of worship. They're divided over issues of Christian spirituality. They're divided over the nature of speaking in tongues. They're divided over the issue of slavery. They're divided over whether rich and poor are really equals in the church. They're divided over church giving and finances. They're divided over who's more faithful than whom, who's more theologically astute than whom, who's more generous than whom, who's more truly committed to the gospel than whom. And they're divided over how much they should or shouldn't listen to the apostle Paul. And all that, in a church whose membership probably wasn't a lot larger than our own!

It was Paul who had founded the church in Corinth several years earlier. Then he had moved on to found churches in yet other places. With all the controversies now swirling around in the Corinthian church, some members wrote to Paul asking his advice. Some of the advice he gave has been preserved in the books we call 1st and 2nd Corinthians. 1st Corinthians 13 probably is

the most widely recognized passage in Paul's Corinthian correspondence. This passage is part of Paul's response to a debate within the congregation over which spiritual gifts are the genuinely important ones for a Christian to have. His response in this passage is threefold.

First off, Paul cites six spiritual gifts in particular: the gift of speaking in tongues (which is the involuntary emitting of sounds that are not a humanly understandable language but that are experienced as the language of the Holy Spirit); the gift of prophecy (which, again, in the early church meant inspired preaching); the gift of understanding of all mysteries and knowledge (which means: having information regarding the acts and plans of God that other Christians don't have access to); the gift of faith (even miracle-working faith); the gift of generosity (even to the point of giving away all you have to others); and the gift of self-sacrifice (readiness to let go of one's own well-being and life for the sake of others). And Paul insists that, as important as such gifts are to the Christian community, if put to use *without love*, they are wasted.

Secondly, Paul identifies twelve characteristics of love: Love is patient and long-suffering. Love is kind. Love doesn't get envious or jealous or grudging. Love doesn't brag. Love doesn't become puffed up or self-important. Love doesn't do anything in a disgraceful way. Love seeks not its own advantage but the good of others. Love doesn't get provoked or throw fits or tantrums. Love doesn't keep count of other people's deficiencies and misdeeds. Love takes no pleasure in unfairness. Love rejoices when the truth prevails. Moreover, there is no limit to love's perseverance, no limit to love's faith, no limit to love's hope, no limit to love's endurance.

Thirdly, Paul contrasts the permanence of love with the provisional and temporary nature of the so-called spiritual gifts. At the end of worldly time, when the kingdom of God is all in all, there'll be no more sermons, there'll be no more speaking in tongues, and there'll be no more striving for special knowledge of God's plan for the end of time. Sermons, tongues, and knowledge are for the time when we see only *in part*. They are only for the time *before* the world accords completely with God's creative aim, at which point they will come to an end. And there'll be no need for hope or for faith. There'll be no need for hope, because we'll already be where we'd been hoping to get, and there'll be no need for faith, because we'll already be in the realm that faith was about, namely: in the kingdom of God where all things are in perfect accord with the love God is. Neither faith nor hope but only love will then remain – and love will abide forever. Hope, faith, and spiritual gifts – these things have meaning and worth only for a certain time: only until the end of time as we know it. But even at the end of time, when those things are no more, still there will be love. Love is what created you and me. And love is what awaits us in the end. Love is what endures.

(2)

I want now to add to Paul's words, something that he himself doesn't specifically clarify. I want to distinguish between, on the one hand, the love that Paul is talking about here, and on the other hand, *romantic* love. Before I do that though, let me note that just because romantic love is not the same thing as the love that is the heart of Christian life, doesn't mean that romantic love isn't good. Romantic love can be wonderfully good – both for me and for the person I am romantically in love with. But: romantic love *is* different from the love that is the heart of Christian life.

When I experience romantic love for another, I'm experiencing something that has its point of reference, measure, and evaluation *in me*. I'm experiencing *another person* as a means to *my* self-assertion and self-fulfillment. When I love someone romantically, I don't love them purely

and simply for their own sake. I love them also for *my* sake. I love them because there's something in *me* that I enjoy letting *them* fulfill. Romantic love doesn't just *give*; it also needs to *receive*. That does not mean that romantic love is merely selfish or greedy; it *can* be selfish and greedy, but it *isn't necessarily* selfish and greedy. It's just that romantic love for another *is* wrapped up in my hope for that person to help me with what is going on in my own heart right now. Romantic love is a form of self-assertion, and it is a longing and quest for self-fulfillment – which isn't necessarily unjust or unfair or bad. Just because I experience another person as a means to my own self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment doesn't mean I'm using them injuriously or wrongly. It just means that the love I feel for the *other* person is a love that is also for *my* sake. Romantic love can be nurturing. It can be kind and gentle and patient and fair and generous and long-suffering and all sorts of other good things. However, romantic love *does* have its point of reference, measure, and evaluation in me, as something I enjoy and seek out not because I'm told to, but simply because it delights me and does me good as something *I* want.

Christian love, on the other hand, does *not* have its point of reference, measure, and evaluation in *me*. Rather, it has that in *Christ's command* to love with the love that *he* came bringing, and in the *Holy Spirit's gift of the freedom* to love as Christ commanded! Christian love is the act of existing for others and offering oneself to others, not because of something one gets, or expects to get, or desires to get in return, but simply in order to give oneself to others as Jesus gave himself and calls us to give ourselves to others.

(3)

Jesus's love for others was not a quest for self-fulfillment, nor a response to something about others that made him feel good about himself. Rather, Jesus loved others simply for *their* own sake, for *their* own good, for the furtherance of *their* own best interests, by working always to open them to God's graciously unconditional love for them, by working always to promote conditions that deepen and broaden their capacity to receive God's love, and by working always to alleviate any conditions that hinder them from receiving that love.

I find helpful the way the late Presbyterian minister and former teacher of mine, Ed Farley, once put it (see: *Divine Empathy*, Fortress Press, 1996, p.277): Jesus's love – and, so, the heart of Christian love – is a freedom to be there for others *without* seeking something for myself. Christian love is an act of self-giving that is oriented simply toward the other person's capacity to receive love, and that is focused on actually enlarging the other person's capacity to receive love – and all this without demanding, seeking, expecting, or needing anything for itself in return. Christian love is the freedom to be there for others in an act of self-giving that is oriented toward other people's capacity to receive love, whoever and wherever they are; whose aim is to promote conditions that enlarge their capacity to receive love and that alleviate any hurt or any suffering that hinders them from receiving love; and, so, that does *not* turn on, depend on, or rely on anything one might get or need for oneself in return.

It might be helpful to think of this in terms of a mother's love for her child. I hasten to note at the outset that a mother can and will love her children in all sorts of ways, many of which will have to do with what the mother gets, or expects to get, or desires to get in return. Mothers do love their children in self-seeking ways. Mothers do love their children in ways that look to the child to soothe, satisfy, bolster, and fulfill some of the mother's own personal and even self-centered hopes, desires, needs, and longings – ways that leave the mother looking to the child to enable the mother herself to feel a certain way about her own life. Nevertheless, in the mother-child relationship there can be and sometimes are, intimations of a different kind of love, a love that

really isn't self-centered, but that is focused on the good of the child even if it means risking the mother's own actual good; a love that really isn't self-seeking, but that seeks what is right for the child even if at considerable cost to the mother's personal well-being and contentment. This is a love that wants purely and simply for the child to know love; this is a love that is focused purely and simply on enabling the child to receive as much love as possible; this is a love whose key concern is purely and simply to enlarge the child's capacity to receive ever greater love – and to promote whatever conditions need promoting for that to happen. And, too, this is a love that always knows that it is risking failure, that always knows that it risks being, at some point, disregarded, resisted, or even rejected by the child, but that does its work nevertheless, simply as a matter of self-giving love.

Christian love takes this mother-child love yet further – or perhaps we should say: Christ's love takes the Christian yet further than that. For Christian love conducts itself in that way, not just sometimes but always, and not just toward "our own," or just toward "those like us," or just toward those who "matter" more personally to us, but, rather, toward *all others*.

Christian love is the freedom to be there for others in a Christ-like act of self-giving. Christian love is not driven by its own neediness or self-interests. It does not think in terms of rewards, not even in terms of "feeling good" about itself for what it's doing. It keeps on giving without requiring recognition or acknowledgment or even a "thank you" in return. Christian love is the freedom, without thought of gain or reward for itself, to be oriented simply toward other people's capacity to receive love, and toward doing what can be done to promote conditions that let that happen. Christian love therefore is focused on soothing any hurt and alleviating any suffering that prevents others from receiving love, whoever they are, whatever is hurting, whatever they are suffering. Christian love does not originate in and is not bound to what *I* receive, want, need, or desire from others for myself. Rather, it originates in and is bound to only this: Christ's command to love with the love that he came bringing, and the Holy Spirit's gift of the freedom to love as Christ commanded – which is to say: by existing for others and offering oneself to others, not because of something one gets, or expects to get, or desires to get in return, but simply in order to enlarge, simply in order to deepen and broaden, their capacity for love – and this, knowing full well that, in the present world, we always are risking failure, always are risking being disregarded, resisted, or even rejected by those whom we, in this way, love.

(4)

The life of Christian love is rooted not in me or in you, but in Christ's command to us. It is not the life of simply natural love. It is, if you will, the life of *supernatural* love. The only reason to take it up is this: It is what Jesus Christ, the self-revelation of eternal God, commanded, and what his Holy Spirit frees us to do, for the sake of the future that *God* intends, and is calling into being, and is calling us to serve. When we love in this way, we actually abide in a love that is not of this passing world, a love that actually is more real, more lasting, more enduring, than the world that we presently know. When we love in this way, we abide in the love that eternal God forever *is* – the love that created you and me – the love that awaits us at life's end – the love that turns us into who God, in giving us life, has blessed us to become.

The time is coming when we shall know fully what God has been up to with us on this earth. In the meantime: faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. Amen.