

Christian Love

1 Corinthians 13, NRSV; 1 Corinthians 13, The Message

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1st Corinthians, Chapter 13! I suspect most of us are familiar with this passage. You can find it anywhere. I've seen it printed on large canvas to be hung a home or office. Clothes with a few lines printed on them. Of course there are greeting cards and mugs available. Probably the most common place to hear part or all of this passage is at a wedding. Even non-church weddings are fond of using a few lines from this very memorable chapter. It's a favorite.

We need to bear in mind Paul is not writing a wedding sermon. This is not sentimental advice for newlyweds. Paul is writing about Christian love for everyone. The entire church. Old, young, married, single, gay, straight – every permutation and variation thereof.

Paul's question is, what does Christian love look like? How do we live together in love? That's the question Paul is answering. What does Christian love look like?

Paul doesn't just tell us in one neat sentence, wrapped up in a bow. "Christian love is" He's not short and sweet, by any means. Instead, Paul expands on it and in the process delivers this hymn of praise to love. Let's see what he says.

Paul begins by making it clear love is not simply doing something well. Love is not about being the best or the most spiritual. ***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.*** (NRSV, vs 1-2). I may be the best preacher in Ohio. I may excel at home visits and

bringing communion to the retirement center. My prayers may be the stuff of legend. Great, excellent, wonderful. But if I don't have love, I'm nothing.

What about you, my friends? What do you do well? What's your strength? Are you a productive farmer? Are you an award-winning teacher? Do you make the best pie in New Bremen? Are you the best coach your team has ever had? Great, excellent, wonderful. But if you don't have love, it doesn't matter. It's nothing. Without love, we're nobody. Love, Paul says, is more than using our gifts well.

It's also more than simple politeness. Politeness is good. Courtesy matters. But manners wear thin. Love does not.

Paul tells us love hangs in there. ***Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.*** (NRSV, vs 4-5a) Love bears the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. It never gives up on the broken-down addict. It doesn't pull back from the repeat offender. Love hangs in there with patience, kindness, not insisting on its own way.

In other words, love keeps the relationship going. They'll know we are Christians by our love because our love hangs in there and keeps the relationship going.

Love is not about being spiritual or doing things well. Those matter. Very much. But love is first and foremost about maintaining our relationships. Just as God's love for us never ends, so our love for each other never ends.

Some things, of course, do end. Someday prophecy will no longer be necessary. Speaking in tongues will become obsolete. But love doesn't end. Love is the constant in this life and the next.

When we were children, we learned to love like children. We learned the simple love that was appropriate to our age and stage of development. But now, we're adults. It's time to put aside childish love and love like adults. And how do adults love? With tenacity.

We embrace the never-ending love of God and share it with one another.

Is it difficult? Yes. Of course it is. We don't know how life's going to play out. We don't know what the future's going to bring. We're living in a fog. We're walking through a dark valley.

But one day, in God's time, the fog will lift. We'll walk out of the dark valley into the perfect light of God. And when we do, we'll understand. We'll understand God's perfect love.

Until then, Paul says, let's do this. ***But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.*** (MSSG, v 13). Let's trust in God, be unswervingly positive, and love extravagantly.

Coach the team, bake the pies, run the business, but do it with love. Be kind, be caring. Don't give up on the relationship, even when it's hard. And when life gets hard, as it will, we have three things to fall back on: faith, hope, and love. And the most important of these is love.

Thanks be to God for the gift of love. May we love well. Amen.