

**“What is Love? Defining our Calling” based on 1 Corinthians 13 and Luke 4:20-30**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on January 30, 2022, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

My favorite memories from my childhood are usually those where I was spending time with my grandmother. She lived about 10 minutes away by car & I spent the majority my summers with her. She didn't have a license, so if we went anywhere, we walked, including to the Great American grocery store and the old five and dime, Ben Franklin. And on these walks, we would spend a lot of time talking with her, and one walk in particular, I remember well.

I can still see us where we were when we stopped in that little hamlet called Barclay Heights, on the street where we pulled her little wire shopping cart with us. We were coming up on the main road where the two stores were and where the road intersected the street where one of my classmates lived at that time. I told my grandmother that his birthday was that day, I had not been invited, even though all of my other friends had been invited and were there.

I didn't know why I wasn't invited. I thought we were friends too. So I told my grandmother in no uncertain terms, 'I hated him.' But rather than affirming my feelings and frustration, my grandmother corrected me and it has always stuck with me, because she stopped me at the corner of the two roads and said, *“You are not to hate anyone. You don't have to like him. but you do have to love him. You won't like everyone you meet, and you don't have to like anyone, but you do have to love everyone. Jesus said so.”*

This was about second grade or so, and my grandma taught me a lesson I'd never forget. It wasn't the only time she said this to me either. We continued to the grocery store and added a stop at the Ben Franklin. While in there, Grandma had me pick out a birthday present for the classmate. On our way home, we stopped at his house to drop it off and leave.

After what I said, she wanted me to do something to make it right. It didn't matter if only she heard me say I hated him, or that I wasn't invited and was wrongly excluded. She made me do something that showed love to him. My grandmother made it clear to me that love is not a feeling, it is an action. Our feelings can be fickle, and we can't help if we like or don't like someone, but as she would remind me, Jesus commanded us to love, so it is an action.

My grandmother showed me by example how I was supposed to love others. She didn't let me get bogged down in how I had been excluded, but instead made it clear that I was to love inclusively, to show love to others first, rather than just expect to receive it.

Today's passage from 1 Corinthians 13 is critically important for us to understand love in all of the New Testament. That's because this is the word most commonly used in the New Testament for 'love,' is the Greek 'agape.' I realize that if you've been to church enough, you've heard sermons on love, in which the preacher talks of the 3, 4, or even 6 words in Greek for love. It's familiar to many of us to hear that *eros* is that romantic love, *philio* the love of friends, and *storge* is the love among family that is obligatory. With these, *agape* then is defined as the love of God, and the love we have for God and neighbor.

Yet, what I learned only a few years ago changed how I see this word. You see, by studying the word *agape*, I found out that prior to the writing of the New Testament, the word *agape* was rarely used. There's only a handful of uses of this word as a noun before the New Testament. And as a verb it meant 'to prefer.' The best place to find it in a pre-Christian context is in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament, but even there, it is the word used primarily to describe our love for God, but God's love for us, '*chesed*' was usually translated 'mercy.'

So, what does this mean and why does this matter to us? I believe that what we have here in 1 Corinthians 13 is not a poem or cute little reflection on love. Paul is giving us a definition. He's defining an otherwise poorly defined word that is now in common use among Christians. He needs to make sure his readers know this word is not a 'preference,' so, he's using action verbs he describes this noun, this thing, *agape*.

And so, Paul is answering the question: What is love? That's why in my translation, rather than using adjectives, I translated the verbs as verbs.

Rather than love is patient, I read to you today, 'love waits patiently,' meaning it suffers long, defers anger, and so, to have 'agape,' is to do this. Rather than love is kind, I read to you 'love acts benevolently,' because kindness here is the act of helping someone who is in need, and so, 'agape' love is to do something helpful for someone.

Now Paul tells us a little of what this 'agape' love does not do. Love does not envy. 'Agape' does not actively wish to have what someone else has. Love does not boast. 'Agape' does not compare itself to others to lift itself up. Love does not puff up. 'Agape' is not a show of superiority over others. Love does not behave rudely. 'Agape' respects social behaviors. Love does not pursue its own interests, or 'investigate,' meaning 'agape' does not put its own interests first, or act to prove itself right. That's not love.

Love is not easily provoked. 'Agape' does not look for reasons to be angry at others. Love does not keep records of wrong. 'Agape' is not a point system for comparison that tracks successes and failures, because that wouldn't be love. Love does not rejoice on account of injustice. This was harder to translate, because the word rendered rejoice, is also the word for 'grace.' It could be read as 'Love does not have grace for injustice,' meaning 'Agape' does not benefit from injustice, but instead, he says we must 'rejoice within the truth' or be 'gracious within the truth.'

And lastly, love bears all, meaning 'Agape' protects and carries others in all circumstances. Love is faithful to all, or as most translations render it, 'believes all,' meaning that 'agape' tries to interpret others favorably, to trust others' stories. Love hopes for all. 'Agape' wishes the best for all, not the condemnation of others. And love remains with all. 'Agape' is about staying in relationship. This laundry list definition is why Paul says that 'agape' never fails, it is the act of faithfulness.

Leading in, Paul said that you could accomplish great works of faith, even martyrdom, but without love they are nothing, just noise and wholly unprofitable. And after his definition, he

explains that prophecy will not last. It is fulfilled and it is gone. Languages are temporary. Personal knowledge will be gone, once all is known to all. For now, we see in a mirror, darkly or obscured, as most Roman mirrors had dents in the metal, but when all things are made new, it will be face to face.

Paul says he knows some things in part, but then he will know fully, as God fully knows him. He raises up faith, hope and love as constant with God, but the greatest of is love. Love is the very essence of who God is and it is the foundation of relationship. The triune God is one God in relationship – Father, Son and Spirit. The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father, each one in and through the Holy Spirit proceeding from them. The priority is the relationship – they are co-equal, all power, glory and kingdom belong to all three – who are three persons in one God.

And so, this God is the God in relationship with Israel, faithful to a people for all time, and so faithful to humanity, that in the Son, this God shared in our humanity. This is who Jesus is – the loving God – come to share in our limited nature, to reveal God to us, empowered by the Spirit, to live as we live, die for us, and rise again to new life so that we might become God's temples, filled both individually and corporately with the same Spirit that empowered Jesus and raised him from the dead. And so Paul describes this Spirit pouring love directly from God in us, for us to share.

And so, if what Paul did was give us a definition of this love that Jesus shared with us, then what does it mean to answer his command to love? This is a command that stretches so far to love our enemies? You see, it's hard enough when we think of these commands for family & friends, but to extend this love beyond, to those whom we have no relationship with us, and to those with whom we may have strained relationships, and to those who may be our actual enemies, seems so much, much, much harder.

Jesus's command for us to love one another as he has loved us, goes beyond our circles. God sharing in our humanity, is God sharing in the challenges of God's own enemies. That's right, our human tendency is to turn away from God and toward our own interests, to turn away from those in our community who need us and turn instead toward those who benefit us.

To love others sounds nice, and people love to quote it, but rarely what they mean is the radical love Jesus and Paul describe. Yet this is the very love the Holy Spirit pours in us; it is the self-giving love God has for you and me. This is the love we recognized in Brent's baptism, a love that we do not earn, but it is given to us, as grace, unmerited favor, in Jesus.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus has just proclaimed that he is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, that he has come to proclaim good news to the poor, release for those in captivity, recovery of sight to the blind, and to set the broken and oppressed free. At first the people are excited about this – what words of grace they are. They are poor and want to hear good news. They are captive to Rome's taxes and military and want release. They want to recover their sight, their vision of God, and they want an end to what oppresses them.

But Jesus is not their private savior, he is the savior of the world. Jesus implies that his message is not only for Israel, but for the enemies of Israel as well. He speaks of the widow of Zaraphath, whom we talked about a few weeks back. She was a Baal worshiper from the same region as the wicked queen Jezebel, and yet it was to her that Elijah was sent, it was her son God raised to life through Elijah. And Jesus mentions Naaman, the enemy Assyrian general, who between attacks on Israel was healed of leprosy by God, through the prophet Elisha's intervention. The hometown crowd wants Jesus to be theirs, to be their private savior, their mascot.

Now, there is a difference between wanting a private savior, one that is all your own, one that loves people you love, that affirms you in who you are, and rejects those you don't like. There's a difference between that and having a personal savior, whom you turn to in repentance, knowing you are in need of a savior just like everyone else. It's realizing all deserve God's love if you do.

Often, these get confused and people say personal, when they mean private. God is personal, but not private. We must not reject the idea of a personal God, one who knows us and loves us as individuals just because some want to make God private, one who loves who we love, and hates who we hate.

My grandmother made me ring the doorbell and present the gift to my classmate. This gift was a lot like grace – He had done nothing to deserve a gift from me. He had treated me poorly and rejected me, but still Grandma and Jesus made it clear that I was not going to hate him. I had to love him. I was invited into the party, and my amazing Grandmother, then took her groceries home, put them away, and came back. I can still see her sitting in their front room, waiting patiently while I was playing with friends.

The classmate responded to my love, but even if he hadn't, the gift was his. This was an important lesson for me, and though my Grandma never quoted 1 Corinthians 13, but it was clear she was teaching its lesson, waiting patiently for me, bearing with me, while making me act benevolently, not to boast or get my way, or act rudely. She helped me mature and grow into a fuller understanding of God's love, a love that extends beyond those whom I know already love me, and beyond to those who may not deserve it.

My sisters and brothers, I want us to think about this passage and try to commit it to memory, not my translation, but the one from your favorite bible. I want you to see it in a new way, as the definition of what it means to love one another and to love God. This is the love others should see and know that we are Christians by our love.

Now, I've failed many times with my children and in my life. And when it is difficult, I find myself reciting in my head, 'Love is patient, love is kind...' as I struggle to emulate these words. These verses are a much-needed reminder of how I should act, how I can love others as God loves me. Perhaps if we all tried to do this more, holding this paragraph in our heads, the success we have in loving others would increase, and all who encounter us, would know we are Christians by our love because they see God's love at work in us. Amen.

## 1 Corinthians 13 (Pastor's Translation)

If I speak in human languages or those of angels, but I do not have love, I have become the sound of a copper pot or a clanging cymbal. And if I should have a prophecy and understand all mysteries, & all knowledge too, and if ever I should have all the faith needed to carry away mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if ever I might give away all my possessions, and if ever I might surrender my body in order to be burned, but I do not have love, I've gained nothing.

Love waits patiently, acts benevolently. Love does not envy. Love does not boast, does not puff up, does not behave rudely, and it does not pursue its own interests. Love is not easily provoked, does not keep records of wrong, does not rejoice on account of injustice, but rejoices within the truth. Love bears all, is faithful to all, hopes for all, and remains with all. Love never fails.

But prophecies will be set aside. Languages will be ended. Knowledge will be set aside. For we have partial knowledge, and we prophesy in part. However, when the completion should come, the partial will be set aside. When I was a child, I talked like a child. I thought like a child. I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I set aside immature things. For now, we see in a mirror, obscured, but then it will be face to face. I know now in part, but then I will know fully, as also I have been fully known. But now faith, hope and love remain, these three things. But the greatest of these is love.