

The Rev. Kerith Harding's Sermon for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany, February 3, 2019<sup>1</sup>

This morning's reading from 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most familiar passages of scripture. Where do we usually hear it read? [Congregation: Weddings!] Right! No doubt you've heard it used in that context numerous times over the years.

However, whereas some say, familiarity breeds contempt, in the case of 1 Corinthians 13, I seriously doubt that is the case! Rather, the danger is that our familiarity with the passage causes us not to really examine it and ponder what it means for our lives. Not unlike the Lord's Prayer, or Psalm 23, other scripture lessons that many of us know by heart, it can be easy to sentimentalize it or dismiss the passage without giving it much thought. ("Oh yeah, that's a great lesson. Really lovely.")

A little context can be helpful in digging deeper into this passage's meaning. Essentially, in the same way that if you write a letter to someone you are responding to a need or trying to communicate something that is important to you, Paul's letter to the Christian Community in Corinth is doing the same thing. His letter arose out of what he saw as crisis in the church there. It is likely that everything that he says Love *IS*, they are NOT being. And that everything he says Love is *NOT*, they are with some frequency. So, while we may read this passage and think, "That's the most beautiful description of Love I have ever heard," the Corinthians were likely somewhat offended. The letter is meant to provoke them into examining their behaviors and common life. It is as relevant to us today as it was to them and no doubt could be a standard upon which any congregation or individual could be measured.

I believe I've shared with you once before the exercise I have used myself as a spiritual practice every few years and which I use in pre-marital counseling, where I take verses 4-6 of this passage and replace every use of the word Love with my own name... Kerith is patient,

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon benefitted overall from insights shared by Lewis F. Galloway and Jeffery D. Jones in their reflections published in "Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4"

Kerith is kind, Kerith is not envious or boastful, or arrogant, or rude. She does not insist on her own way; she is not irritable or resentful... Hey, who started laughing!?!?! I see you. I know where you live... ☺

Anyway, you get the idea...

Now, take a moment, use your leaflets, and do this exercise, quietly inserting your own name in in place of the word love... [\*Pause to give people time.\*]

Brutal isn't it?

On a good day, I can barely get past patient!

But, before we're all despondent, it's important to remember that the love Paul is describing is agape, that's the kind of love most embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Now... we are *not* Jesus, so we are going to fall short of that. It is never going to be a description that describes me and you. But with God's help, we *can* grow toward it.

Frankly, I believe there is no greater aspiration than to work toward this goal. To remember that Love is most importantly an action, rather than a feeling. Paul is saying – you can be the most gifted or talented person, you can have all the money in the world, or you can even give it all away, but if you don't have love, you are nothing. If we put that in a congregational context, he's saying that all the hymn singing, all the bible studies, all the outreach, all the giving we do... if it isn't done in a spirit of Love... if it is done to show off, to look good, to make others look lacking, to assuage guilt, or ANY OTHER REASON than love, then it is nothing. NOTHING; his word, not mine. If that isn't a call to self and communal self-reflection, I don't know what is.

And so, how do we grow in love?

First, we forgive ourselves for not reaching it already. We forgive ourselves for striving towards and not achieving an ideal that is impossibly difficult to achieve. And obviously the community at

Corinth was struggling to achieve it because if they were doing it all well, Paul never would have had to give them this pep talk.

When we see a gap, as we inevitably will, between the ideal and our own behavior, the response is not necessarily, “Well, I *should* be better.” For some folks, there’s really no need to encourage more criticism of the self. Many of you, I suspect, say things to yourselves that you would never say to another person. Many folks, and you know if this describes you, are far kinder to other people than they are to themselves. In fact, sometimes what prevents us from loving as deeply and as widely as we can is a failure to see that our love actually matters to the world, that our gifts are actually gifts that the world might need, that at our core we are good, and that this goodness can fertilize the world around us. Psychologists have long understood the connection between our capacity to accept, forgive, and have compassion for ourselves and our capacity to genuinely connect with others. So first, we allow ourselves missing this impossible mark.

Then, we get to work trying anyway. Trying is, after all, the Christian journey. Trying to love ourselves, trying to love our neighbor, trying to be patient with ourselves, trying to be patient with our neighbor. Discipleship is about trying. Not about succeeding. But trying.

Most of us, I bet, have a baptismal or wedding gift with this passage etched in glass, or stitched to a pillow case. Most of us overlook these gifts. But when you get home, look at them with fresh eyes, for what they are. Not trite reminders of some sentimental idea. But reminders of God’s love for US. Reminders of the promise that we live and move and dwell in a love that is huge and encompasses each of us every day. AMEN.