

Defining Words of Faith: 10

Love

by
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

November 13, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:12-18, 27-31

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

1 Corinthians 13

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. ²And 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. ³If 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.

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸Love 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. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When 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. ¹²For 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. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Once I started planning this series on the *Defining Words of Faith*, I knew it had to culminate at the end with Love. It's probably the most important word in our biblical vocabulary, but its common usage presents a challenge for recovering its deep theological meaning. Some of the other terms we've considered had to be dusted off – words like *Justification*, *Sanctification* and *Sovereignty* – because, while historically important, those words now seem obscure and old-fashioned. We had to remind ourselves how some of those dated words are still helpful in defining who God is and who we are in relationship to God as we seek to be faithful. But some words of faith are used so often and so broadly that they risk losing their theological significance. *Love* has to be at the top of that list.

Love is a deeply meaningful word when we say we love our spouses and companions, our children and our parents. How we love our friends, and love God or at least try to love God. *Love* is most courageous when we heed Jesus' admonishment to love our enemies. But we also cast that word *love* out in so many directions surely it loses some of its biblical punch, if not its power. I'm talking about how we love that certain coffee in the morning, how we love that new car smell; we love the Phillies and we love our yoga classes; we love the new restaurant around the corner and we love watching reruns of old favorite TV shows on Netflix. Because we love more than a few of our favorite things, today the challenge before us is to revive the profound biblical meaning of love. Now, I don't mean we should no longer love the book we're reading, or stop loving the birds at the feeder outside the window, but let's not lose the theological meaning of its centrality to the Christian faith which is stronger, deeper and stranger than any of our other *loves*.¹

Obviously, the best person to help us is the Apostle Paul. Because of the eloquence of Paul's message on love in First Corinthians 13, we often hear these words at weddings. Surely the vows that bind two people together "in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long

¹ David Bartlett, "Great Words of Faith: Love," in *The Collected Sermons of David Bartlett*. David's series preached at the Congregational Church of New Canaan, CT, in 2010 was inspiration for this series and this particular sermon, p. 204ff.

as we both shall live,” take flight on the wings of – “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” However, it is worth noting – from time to time – that Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth did not originally address a starry-eyed twosome whose love for one another stands softly illumined by radiant family and friends, candlelight and flowers. Paul’s words are meant for the church, for the widely diverse community of people who can barely tolerate each other, and yet are called to love each other across all kinds of differences and disagreement.

If you read chapters 12 and 13 together as we have today, you realize that each needs the other. Chapter 12 about the body with its many and varied parts – needs Chapter 13 about love – like a hand needs a heart. Chapter 13 longs for chapter 12 in the manner that love in community is complex, hard work. Paul is encouraging very different people to understand their mutuality in the church is vital to fulfill its purpose.

As a reminder, Corinth was a major center of trade and commerce about 50 miles west of Athens, and surrounded by coastal ports that brought in people from all over the known world. From Paul’s admonition about the proper way to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we know that the Corinthian church included the socio-economic and ethnic diversity of the city itself. It had wealthy members who lived in houses with courtyards sizeable enough to hold a large crowd. The church also attracted working class folks who included a diverse immigrant community. And perhaps the hardest chasm to cross was there were Jewish Christians, who hung on tightly to their old religious traditions, and there were Gentile Christians, newcomers to the faith, who argued that they should not have to adhere to the old in order to live into the new.

Having addressed their diversity in Chapter 12 with the image of the church as a body, Paul shows how genuinely interrelated we are: without the opposable thumb, the fingers are practically useless; you can’t walk straight if your inner ear is all messed up; the eye needs a brain to really see. “You are the body of Christ,” Paul says to people who are arguing about all kinds of matters related to what they believed and what religious practices should

govern their communal life. So, when he gets to Chapter 13's closing affirmation: "Faith, hope, love abide – these three, but the greatest of these is love," these are words meant to hold a fractured church together.

Concerned by how we have so domesticated these words about love, one New Testament scholar says that First Corinthians 13 needs to be, and I quote: "rescued from the quagmire of romantic sentimentality in which popular piety has embedded it... For these words are not about romance, sentiment, or how to behave with people who like us. They are about an otherwise outrageous way to respond to those who do not like us."²

These words about love are about how to behave because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. They are about being the body of Christ, when some people consider themselves wiser and more important than others, to the exclusion of others. Paul, who was spreading the gospel across a wide range of humanity, reminds us that we in the church need one another to be fully faithful, and the lifeblood connecting this interdependent, diverse body of believers is inclusive, hard-working, sacrificial love. When Christians talk about *Love* we mean the love that God shows for us, and the love that we are to show toward God and one another. These two loves are so interrelated that they are meant to be very nearly one.

In today's hotly contested climate, far too often, these deep theological roots of this biblical kind of love have been severed from their source. As Will Willimon has said rather succinctly: "There are those who know everything about Jesus except that he is love, and who use the Bible like a bludgeon. There are people for whom Christianity is a way to divide, separate, and put down others. Without love," Willimon concludes, "the Christian faith can become cruel, ugly."³

The truth of that observation is everywhere in the headlines these days, especially when religious fervor is partnered with calls to violence. And, any

² Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation Commentaries."

³ Willimon, *Living Pulpit*, vol.1:3, p. 7.

of us have gotten pretty good at calling it out and naming the hypocrisy of other Christians and their lack of love for what it is. We are less adept at seeing it in ourselves. It's been proven that we have sorted ourselves into like-minded pods of people so that we have minimized rubbing up against too much diversity. Yet there is something about the church that not only attracts a wide range of diverse human beings, but also requires IT to function properly. One of the questions before the church today, in our time of bitter hostilities and incivility, is can we model respectful hospitality and civil community in the midst of our diversity?

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that anything goes in order to get along. We have to address matters of justice that are politically divisive, for example, but can we do the hard work of the gospel – working for justice and peace, working against violence and racism, against xenophobia and sexism, working together with sacrificial love that – how does Paul put it? *is patient; kind; not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Can We take on the posture of love that does not insist on its own way; is not irritable or resentful; but rejoices in the truth. That love which bears all things, endures all things and forms a close partnership with faith and hope.*

Theologian James Smith argues that Christian discipleship is about far more than thinking and doing. It's about loving. "To be human is to have a heart," he writes, "You can't not love." Smith encourages us to focus on the things that God loves – so many of the things we have considered in this series: incarnate community; mercy and forgiveness; human beings growing in faith and faithfulness; growing in hope and increasing our capacity for sacrificial love.⁴

In his book *To the End of the Land* about a family living the trauma of violence, conflict and war, Israeli novelist, David Grossman, tells the story of two brothers. When the older brother Adam is thirteen-years-old he begins to exhibit the signs of compulsive behavior. He washes his hands after he touches any object; he goes through elaborate rituals of speech and action

⁴ Quoted by Scott Black Johnston, *Elusive Grace*, p. 55.

before he can move from one room to another. He stops in the midst of what he is doing to count his fingers and blink his eyes for a designated number of times. His distraught parents read every book they can find and take him to every expert they can afford but nothing much changes.

Then one day Ofer, his nine-year-old brother, takes charge. “Let me do the eye thing today,” he says, and then you won’t have to do it.” Reluctantly Adam gives up his obsessive blinking and gives his brother a turn. A few days later it’s the finger counting. A few days after that another little compulsion. And last of all the hand washing; the younger brother washing his hands often enough and hard enough to serve for both of them. A few years later, the boys’ mother tells how the story comes out: “They played computer games and football, chatted for hours, made up characters, and every once in a while, they cooked pasta together.” And then the mother says, “And while they did all that – don’t ask me exactly how it happened, one of them saved the other.”⁵

Saved by love, perhaps? Saved for love, surely! We are the Body of Christ, Paul says of the church, individually members of one incarnate, embodied community. We are bound together by faith, hope, love.

Love that through the power of God and in the presence of Jesus Christ is stronger, deeper and stranger than any of our other *loves*.

AMEN.

⁵ David Bartlett again, p. 247.