



“No Ordinary Sunday: Love Conquers All”

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
5:30 pm Saturday, January 30, 2016
8:15 & 11:00 am Sunday, January 31, 2016
The Reverend John H. Brock
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Corinth: In the first century, it was second only to the city of Rome in size - 700,000 inhabitants. Corinth housed residents and visitors from every background: Roman; Asian; Jew; Gentile; Egyptian; Greek; sailors; soldiers; athletes and gamblers. Corinth had wealth, high society, plays and architecture. And they had the temple to their patron deity, Venus, fully staffed with 1,000 temple prostitutes. In Corinth, if you wanted it, you got it. If they didn't have it, they'd get it.

From Paul's point of view, it was either make it or break it in Corinth. So when, after working for around a year and a half, preaching the gospel, spreading the message of grace and love and forgiveness, I can only imagine how he must have felt when he was not only able to begin a congregation, but that the congregation really took off. I think we can maybe understand, then, when, within few years after he left, as tensions began to build up, factions formed, morals became fluid, relationships were strained, that Paul became . . . upset.

I have to be honest, I think the guy had some valid reasons. On par with a Steelers / Eagles rivalry, there were folks in the congregation who were claiming superiority based on who had brought them to faith: Apollos or Cephas or Paul (1:10-17). Then, they were apparently claiming that they were *better* than other believers **because of** those teachers (3:1-9).

There was a situation with a member who was living with his father's wife. And, because Paul doesn't go into detail, we have to fill in the blanks and kind of guess that what Paul refers to here is that this man's father died, and he then married his father's widow, otherwise known as his own stepmother, which, under Jewish law, is forbidden. Except, as Christians, they are NOT living under Jewish law, but still, the situation was such as to make folks go “yeeew.” (5:1-2)

There were members bringing lawsuits against other members. (6:1-11) And then there was concern over eating food that had been offered to idols. Think of this in terms of being invited to an “all you can eat” neighborhood bar-b-que, only to find out the entire thing is being underwritten by a politician that you personally *Very Strongly* disagree with. So the questions arise: Do you eat the food because you're hungry? Do you walk away because you don't want anything to do with that politician? Do you eat & drink as much as you can to spend more of the guys' money?

And speaking of food: the Lord's Supper was really that - an actual meal. Everybody brought whatever they could, and everybody shared what they brought. Except . . . that there were certain folks who came to the table *early*, and kind of just kept eating, so that those who got there *later* due to their work schedule didn't have much to eat at all, and they were usually the ones who needed the food the most.

So Paul reacts. Paul gives the Corinthians several admonitions, 'Corrections, and Guidelines as to how to live as believers one of his best, though, is the one we heard in our readings, from chapter 13. We're at best familiar with this passage, and there runs the strong probability that we may be over familiar with it, depending on how many weddings you've attended lately. Paul's theme is *love*.

This is one of those *many* scriptural passages that falls short when translated into English. Because in first century Greek, there are at least four words that get translated into the same English word: Phileo; Storge; Eros; and Agape'. You may well know these, but for those who don't: *phileo*, is a friendship love, for people for whom you more than simply like or enjoy; *storge*, parental love; *eros*, is a more romantic kind of love, or even the more physical type; and then there's *agape*. This is the word that ancient writers used when referring to love from the divine. And in our passage? The nine times the word "love" is used, it's "agape." Maybe we should translate it "**God love**." Let's try this:

*13:1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have **God love**, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 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 **God love**, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have **God love**, I gain nothing. 4 **God Love** is patient; **God love** is kind; **God love** is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. . . . 8 **God Love** never ends.*

Brings a whole new perspective on that passage, doesn't it? But that's the thing, isn't it? This passage is talking about the love of God. It's not talking about *Phileo*, or *Storge*, or *Eros*. This passage is talking about *Agape*, **God love**.

I don't know about you, but I know that ***I*** am **not** capable of loving in the same manner as God.

Sooo, what good is it for us to talk about a love that we are incapable of? Right before chapter 13, Paul is talking about how the body of Christ, the Church, Us, Believers, is made up of all sorts of different kinds of folks. Paul starts off using the analogy of the body, saying we can't all be the hand, because then how would we walk? Or we can't all be the eye, because then how would we hear? We need all the different parts to make a whole.

And before he switches, and begins talking a bit more specifically, he says this really interesting thing: *the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.* (1 Cor. 12:25b-26 NRSV)

Did you catch that? *Have the same care for one another*. I think that's how this "**God**

love" plays into things. God calls us to watch out for one another. God calls us to care for one another. And do you know what it doesn't say? It does NOT say that we have to be buddies with one another. We have to care for one another. We are called by our baptism to look out for one another. But we are not called to be best of friends, simply because we are believers. We *might* be, but that's not part of our baptism. We are called to love and support and care for one another, because we are believers, because we are, together, the Body of Christ.

Okay, so it's at this point in my writing that about three times I had to stop, delete what I wrote, and try this section again. Because we, at Trinity, are becoming much like the first century church in Corinth. We have our annual meeting coming up. One of the topics for discussion are some possible improvements to our facility. I have been informed that such a discussion may be contentious for some. What I am striving to remind us **all**, is that as believers, we are called to allow **God love** to guide us in our discussions with one another. We are called to treat one another with that same love and grace and forgiveness that Christ gives to each of us.

And that is difficult. Because our feelings are our own. Our feelings are strong and passionate. And that is wonderful and fine. We need to remember, though, that as human beings, we are all too capable of locking God out of our hearts, and not listening when God speaks to us, regardless of what God might be saying. As we gather for our annual meeting; as we walk the hallways of Trinity; as we live our lives as believers in Christ, let us remember that God gave us each a brain, and we do NOT have to agree with one another; but we are called to LOVE one another.

*¹³ And now faith, hope, and **God love** abide, these three; and the greatest of these is **God love**.*

Amen.

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