

The passage we are about to read is commonly read at weddings and is called the “love chapter” by many. It is appropriate to read these words at a wedding but these words were not originally written to two people getting married. These words were originally written to a church which was not getting along with each other. A church in conflict.

I chose this text of Scripture today because Tuesday is Valentine’s Day. That day set aside to coax us into expressing our love toward others in some way. Valentine’s Day is usually connected to folks who are romantically involved but we are also encouraged by the powers that be to express our love toward parents, children, and others that are important to us. The words from this passage may make it onto a card or two.

But the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is written to a church community that is lifting up some members of the community as more important than others. The town of Corinth was a cosmopolitan city. There were lots of people from all over the known world who came with different languages, accents, and religions. Corinth had a reputation of being an original “Sin City.”

Corinth was a very diverse town and the Christian church in Corinth reflected this diversity. There were rich and poor, movers and shakers and the ones who were moved and shaken by the actions of the powerful.

In the chapter just prior to what we will be reading, Paul compares the Christian church to being like a body. Paul talks about the importance of spiritual gifts. He recognizes that the Christians in the Corinthian church have a multitude of talents.

The church community, however, was not celebrating that diversity. They were instead saying that some Christians were more important than other Christians. They were saying that some gifts were more important gifts than other gifts.

Paul says that Christian churches are like a body. Just like a body needs eyes and ears and feet and hands all working together, the body of Christ needs all of its parts working together to be faithful. But this church in Corinth was not working together. They were working against one another.

So the question for this church community was concerning how can they change this division? How can they learn to work together? What is essential for a body of Christians who make up a church to be successful together? That is what leads us to the next Scripture we are about to read. This is Paul's answer to their questions.

### **Read I Corinthians 13**

Allison Creek, like all churches, has had its experiences in the past when we have been that divided congregation of believers. There have been times when we have been in conflict. It's not just us Christians that deal with congregational conflicts. There are 2 Jewish worshipping communities in York County because they had a split a couple of years ago. They are not that big but there are two of them.

I was just talking to a friend of mine whose church is in a big fight. The church is in a small town that is stagnant and the church reflects that sense of fear about the future. It's sad in a small town when people come to church together but find ways to avoid people that they perceive to be their enemy. Even though they are all Christians who attend the same church they perceive their enemy to be fellow Christians that attend that same church.

But religious gatherings are not the only places where people can be in conflict with one another. I think we all would agree that we are part of a country right now where people are identifying other people in the same country as the enemy in some way.

So when you think about whom you consider the other in this country, who comes to your mind? Do you consider people who call themselves liberal to be the other? Do you consider people who call themselves conservative to be the other?

Do you consider people from other religions to be the other? Do you consider people of a different ethnic background to be the other? When you look to post something on social media or you look to like an article on Facebook who are you trying to get at with what your post?

Is there a friend or family member that you find yourself uncomfortable around? Has your marital relationship deteriorated to where now your spouse has become the person you dread to be around? Maybe it's your parents or your child or a sibling? Every one of us has someone or a group of someone's that we see as the other in some way.

So now we are going to invite Paul into our situation. We are going to invite Paul to make us uncomfortable. Because Paul in his letter to the Corinthians is writing to people who have identified the other as fellow Christians who attend the same church together. Paul tells them that the way they are to treat the person that they do not like is to love them.

Paul then talks about what this love looks like. In this passage Paul uses the Greek word "Agape" which is translated "love." There are different kinds of love in the Greek language. There is "Eros" love or erotic or romantic love. There is "philia" or love of neighbor. And then there is "Agape" love or sacrificial love.

How does Paul want us to relate to ones we identify as the other or people that we don't like or not getting along with very well? We are to show them sacrificial love. So let's reread some of what Paul says but add in words which Paul was meaning when he wrote these words.

Paul says that love is patient toward the person that you do not like. Love is kind toward that group of people who disagree with you politically. Paul says that love is not envious or boastful toward that person that you want to tear down because they are elevating themselves by what they say.

Paul says that love is not resentful toward that person that has harmed you physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Paul says that love does not rejoice in wrongdoing when that person that you don't like has fallen on hard times or made a big mistake.

But then Paul says something else in this chapter. Paul says that we know stuff only in part. In other words, we don't know everything. We don't know everything that there is about what is best for us. We don't know everything about what is best for our family.

We don't know everything about what is best for this country. We don't know everything. We only know in part. And, therefore, others know something in part as well. Even the ones that we may not like.

So do we give up our convictions? Of course not. We fight for our convictions. Do we allow ourselves to be walked over by others who may say they love us? Of course not. We stand up for ourselves and do not allow ourselves to be abused in any way.

But if we want to be faithful to the way that God wants us to live our lives then we will stand up for what we believe with a humility that says we don't know everything. We stand up for what we believe in a way that doesn't demonize the other. We are not rude or spiteful or mean spirited but we show love, love, love.

So as you go forth today stand up for what is right and true. But be guided by something even stronger than your sense of right and wrong. Be guided by a desire to show sacrificial love in everything you say, everything you do, and everything that you post on social media.

Before you say that word, before you do that act, before you hit the send or post button ask yourself, "Is this being loving?" And if you find yourself pausing then ask yourself, "What is the loving way to share my point of view?" "What is the loving way to hear the viewpoint of a person with whom I may have a difference of opinion?"

Paul tells us to remember that faith, hope, and love abide. But the greatest of these is love. AMEN.

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-Given: February 12, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)