

**January 30, 2022**  
**“Love Beyond the Noise”**  
**1 Corinthians 13:1-13**  
**Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin**

You can tell by now that our focus is on love this morning.

Now that I'm preaching on a more regular basis, I sometimes feel like I end up saying the same basic stuff over and over again, feeling like a broken record. But then I remind myself that if you're gonna be a broken record about anything, love's a pretty good option. And I remind myself that if I'm a broken record about love, it's because Jesus was. It's because the gospels are and the prophets were. It's because love is at the heart of our faith tradition and practice, or at least it's supposed to be.

So with that in mind, we set the needle for yet another sermon about love!

Apart from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and maybe the first chapter of Genesis, there is perhaps no more familiar biblical text than this 13<sup>th</sup> chapter from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians that Darlene just read for us. The Love Chapter.

The apostle Paul writes, at its conclusion, that “faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

He is writing, scholars tell us, about 50 years after Jesus, to a congregation he himself had founded a few years before in Corinth. The capital city in the Roman province of Achaia. A large urban center with an ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse population.

Scholars also tell us that this congregation was decidedly fractious at the time, marked by in-fighting and stuck in a series of internal disputes – particularly around regard of certain spiritual gifts, including ecstatic speech or speaking in tongues, as evidence of an elevated spiritual status. Echoing the disciples before them – and let's be honest, plenty more followers of Jesus AFTER them – arguing about who among them was the greatest. Whose gifts were most important.

Hence the need for Paul's letter, an appeal to unity that we find in his profound description of many different gifts within the one "body of Christ" – as we heard last week. And an appeal to love above and beyond all else, to love as God loves, as we find in this morning's reading and elsewhere in the letter.

"Faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

"If faith," suggests William Sloane Coffin, "puts us on the road, hope keeps us there." And I might further suggest, as Paul did and as Jesus most definitely did, that love is both the road AND the destination.

When Jesus was asked which commandment is the greatest, we know how he answered, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Jesus was simply quoting Jewish law, but he clearly instructs that love – beyond any tendency toward legalism and allegiance to the so-called "letter of the law" – is the GREATEST thing. The only thing that really matters. The road AND the destination.

William Sloane Coffin further elaborates: "It is bad religion to deify doctrines and creeds. While indispensable to religious life, doctrines and creeds are only so as signposts. Love alone is the hitching post. Make love your aim, not biblical inerrancy, nor purity nor obedience to holiness codes. Make love your aim, for . . ." – and here he goes on to reference Paul's letter:

"IF I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love . . . 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 love . . . IF I give away all my possessions, and IF I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love . . . I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. I am noting. I gain nothing."

And then Coffin concludes, "I doubt if in any other scriptures of the world there is a more radical statement of ethics. If we fail in love, we fail in all things else."

If we fail in love, we have nothing. We are nothing. We are but noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. Think about that: if we fail in love, we are just noise. And the last thing this world needs is more noise.

But the truth, of course, is that we all fail in love all the time! We fail in giving love, and we fail in accepting and receiving love. We fail in loving others, and we fail in loving ourselves. And failing to love each other as ourselves, we fail to love God.

And we do so largely because so many of our internal voices, and so many of the voices we hear in the world around us, are rooted in fear. Fear, not hatred, understood as the opposite of love.

We fail to love because we are afraid. Because we are, as Roberta Bondi writes in her book, *To Love as God Loves*, "dominated by the fear of death and of our own physical and emotional vulnerability, and by our ways of compensating for this fear." Fear of death. Fear of vulnerability. Fear of suffering. Fear of loss. Fear of failure. Fear of rejection. Fear of not fitting in. Fear of not having enough. The list goes on, of course. You know this list, we ALL know this list. This list is why love is such hard work.

Fear is the noise we help create, the noise whose volume we help turn up, when we fail to love, the noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. But fear is precisely the noise through and beyond which God's love calls us. Where fear hardens, love softens. Where fear isolates, love opens.

1 John 4:18: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."

But failing to reach perfection in love need not be reason for despair, Bondi also suggests in her book, drawing on the wisdom of the so-called "Desert Monastics." Men and women who, beginning in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, renounced all worldly possessions and

lived apart from the “noise” of the world, out of a desire to focus their attention on perfecting love.

According to Bondi and to the desert monastics, failing to love perfectly need not be reason to despair because perfection is better understood not as “arrival” but as continuous growth. Again, love may be the destination, but it's also the road. She writes that “because God's love is without limit, and because being human means sharing in the image of God, we can never in our human loving reach the limit of our ability to love. . . . That we may never ‘arrive,’ then, is cause for celebration, not despair, because it grows out of our likeness to God.”

Hear that. Love is rooted in our likeness to God, who is the very source of Love, and it is rooted in each and every other's likeness to God. This gets us to the heart of Paul's description of the ‘body of Christ,’ the underlying truth that we can't quite seem to grasp – that every member and every gift is valued and beloved equally in God's eyes. That there is that of God, as the Quakers like to say, in each of us. All of us!

Embracing and internalizing that truth, in true humility that neither devalues nor elevates ourselves or each other, love is able to grow less out of a sense of duty and more out of a sense of delight.

Roberta Bondi again: “Love is not a duty we grimly perform. . . . It is not something we can grit our teeth and do, nor is it a possession that, once we have it, makes us good or acceptable. . . . It has to do with delight in God and (each other) even at its hardest.”

Out of such delight, Bondi further suggests, love is not a fleeting feeling or emotion but becomes central to our disposition, who we are, “a whole of being, feeling, seeing and understanding, at which we arrive by a combination of God's grace, our awareness of what we want, and our own choices, which we make every day of our lives. . . . Day-to-day love has to be learned and exercised even toward the people we find it easy to love. How much more true it is of the difficult people in our lives we want to love! Love takes practice, a whole lifetime's worth.”

“You have heard that it was said,” Jesus taught, “‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . . For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly (Creator) is perfect.”

Be perfect in love, again, NOT as those who have arrived but as those who are committed to continuous growth. As those who are committed to a lifetime of practice. As those who, as Paul puts it, now “know only in part;” but “then . . . will know fully.”

The journey of faith and hope is an invitation to move ever closer to love. And in moving closer to love, closer to God, to each other and to ourselves.

We are called, friends, in this one life that we are given, to a lifetime of learning to love more and more consistently, to fear less and less often. To rise above and beyond the noise and confusion of our daily fears and, as Ephesians puts it, “make melody to the Lord in (our) hearts.” Lead WITH love, IN love, FOR love.

There is no greater pursuit. Love alone, rooted in Divine love, is our hitching post.

Hear again Paul’s poetic description: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

May it be so.