**February 13, 2019**

**1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13**

Despite our usual association of the 13th chapter of First Corinthians with weddings, this passage is not about marital love. Paul wrote this for a community struggling with how to love each other. He called the church to love one another – regardless of knowledge or behavior. Love will “bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things.”

Of course, the previous chapter was all about the need to work for the common good, as opposed to your individual good. Paul wrote about the many members with many gifts, all working for the health of the one body. “Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all speak in tongues? [No.] Strive for the greater gifts. I will show you a more excellent way: If you can speak in tongues, but do so without love, you are a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If you are wise and have faith, but do not have love, you are nothing. If you are generous, but do not have love, you gain nothing.”

In short, it doesn’t matter how wonderful any one person is. It doesn’t matter how great the things they can do or share. If someone doesn’t do it, live it, share it *with love*, then it is worthless. Paul goes to far as to say that if the person (not just the gift) doesn’t have love, they are nothing. You may spend hours volunteering at church, give thousands or millions to God’s glory, share your gifts of wisdom and faith and vision, but it is all for naught if you don’t do it with love.

Love is patient. It never gives up. Love is kind. It cares more for others than for itself. Love is not envious – it doesn’t want what it doesn’t have. Love is not boastful or arrogant or rude – it doesn’t strut, doesn’t force itself on others, doesn’t think too highly of itself, is never “me first.” Love is not irritable or resentful – it doesn’t fly off the handle, or keep score when others succeed. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing – it doesn’t revel when others grovel. Love takes pleasure in truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It puts up with anything, always looks for the best, never looks back, and always trusts God.

Paul never said that love can do anything. It’s not a magic potion to fix all ails. Instead, Paul extolled the persistence of love. Love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Love survives everything. Even when relationships fall apart, even after divorce and war, love will remain.

This Big Love that Paul describes is not something we commonly experience. It is truly other-worldly – a gift from God for the people of God. And remember, this Love is part of the community’s life, not the covenant of marriage. This Love is for committees and congregations and Presbyteries and all people who love Jesus together. Dare I say, even at church we find this kind of love to be a rare gem mined after years of digging in to a community. Because we are used to being loved poorly, incompletely, and conditionally in the world, we can’t help but follow those same patterns (and expect to see those same patterns) at church. We see people do church chores *themselves* because they don’t trust *anyone else* to do it the right way (their way). We see people help only when they are coaxed and cajoled. We see people leave after disagreements, refusing to bear or endure all things. So even in church, we (like the Corinthians) know that this Love doesn’t just happen. Love takes concerted effort and awareness of our individual and collective actions.

Love is leaving the warm and dry confines of the building to help someone move inside from the parking lot. Love is carrying someone else’s babies or diaper bags or doughnuts for coffee hour. Love is sharing an arm or a hand. Love is listening to someone whose ideas are different from your own, sitting through committee and congregational meetings, considering that your idea might not be the right or *only* way. Love is sharing whatever abundance you have – food, time, money – with the community. Love is befriending a child, sitting with them, and teaching them even if they don’t come as often as *you* think they *should*. Love is preparing Sunday School lessons even after weeks of absent children. Love is humbly doing the dishes that were left by a community group using our kitchen. Love is pulling up poison ivy for the umpteenth time even though no one else will touch it. Love is paying for trees to be trimmed so that we can all sit safely in the Sanctuary.

My experience after serving many congregations is that Love is what everyone wants. Love is the thing for which everyone hopes. Love is what we expect – of ourselves and others. But the reality of the daily grind of communal life subconsciously changes our intentions.

After loving this Presbytery and Sweet Hollow enough to push for last week’s Project Regeneration lunch, I was delighted when other congregations shared the love by joining us. (We needed a group of churches to make it go.) Hospitality is an expression of love, so along with a few church members, we lovingly prepared the room and the food for the people we expected. All seemed to go perfectly. I was feeling quite pleased with myself until I sent a loving thank you email to pastoral colleagues for bringing their members. “Let me know if I can do anything to make the experience better,” I said, never expecting that *anything* could possibly be improved. But someone replied. They asked a teeny, tiny change to the next lunch. And I disregarded it as soon as I read it. “Ridiculous!” I thought. *That* would be the thing they would change. Please! It’s not worth it. I’ll just pretend that I never saw this. No, I’ll pretend that it couldn’t be changed because they should be grateful we hosted this wonderful, insightful, *free* lunch at all…!! (pause)

Love is patient. It never gives up. Love is kind. It cares more for others than for itself. Love is not irritable or resentful – it doesn’t fly off the handle, or keep score when others succeed. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It puts up with anything, always looks for the best, never looks back, and always trusts God.

Love was definitely my intention when I planned the lunch. Love was at the front of my mind when we received everyone. Then out it went so quickly – thoughtlessly – when I read that comment. It wasn’t personal. It wasn’t about me or us. It was a simple request. I took a deep breath and thought, “Maybe they’re *right*?! Maybe they have a real need here? Maybe I should think about caring for them instead of making my own life easier? Maybe we could try something different?”

There are so many days when we may do our best, but our best is not loving. We are not living as God would have us. As Paul wrote, we may only see through the mirror dimly. There are days when the community does more harm than good. And when those days come, we need to be reminded that we love because God first loved us. We love because God’s unending patience and faithfulness have already been given to us. We experience this Love when we are called to worship together, singing hymns and hearing God’s Word. We share this Love when we lift up one another’s prayers. We taste this Love when we feast at the Lord’s supper together. And in doing all these things, we pass on this Love, ever hoping, ever waiting for that day when our half-hearted, partial attempts will come to an end and we will know only the reality of the fullness of God’s love. Amen.