



May 12, 2019

Help Us to Share Your Love With the World
Pastor Vern Christopherson

1 Corinthians 13 NRSV

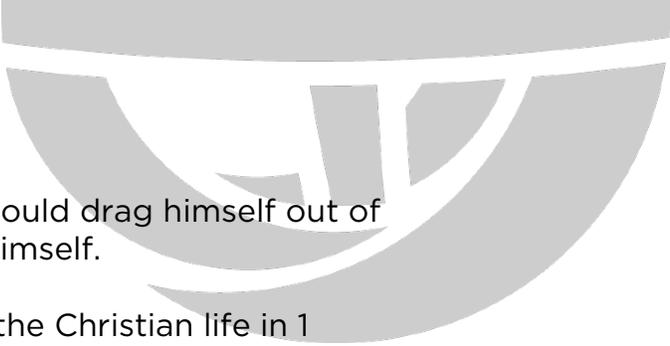
If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all 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 arrogant⁵or 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.

There's a story about Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart from his formative years. He was living with his father Leopold in Vienna. Both were accomplished musicians. From time to time young Wolfgang would play a trick on dear old dad. After a night on the town, he would sneak back into the house quietly. His father would be fast asleep. Wolfgang would go to the piano and start playing loudly. He would play a rising scale of notes, getting slower and louder as those notes reached the resolution at the top of the scale. And then the mischievous Wolfgang would stop one note short, and go to bed.

As the story goes, old Leopold would toss and turn in bed as the unfinished scale played over and over in his mind. After a while, the lack of resolution



became too hard to bear. Eventually Leopold would drag himself out of bed, go down the stairs, and play the last note himself.

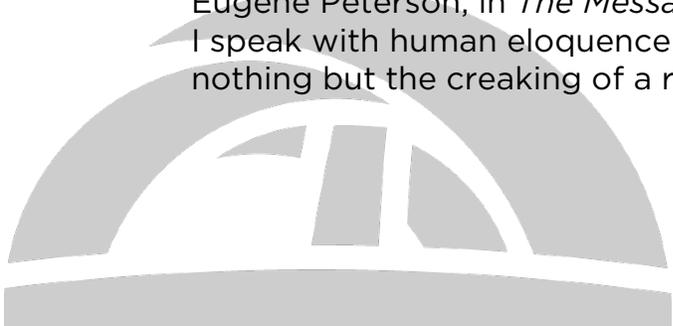
I want you to imagine that Paul's description of the Christian life in 1 Corinthians 13 is a bit like an unfinished scale. As Paul writes his poetry, we hear the music of love. At key moments the music plays louder and slower. It's calling us into the future. Without love, Paul says, nothing is finished or perfectly accomplished. Indeed, love is the endnote to so much of what we're trying to do.

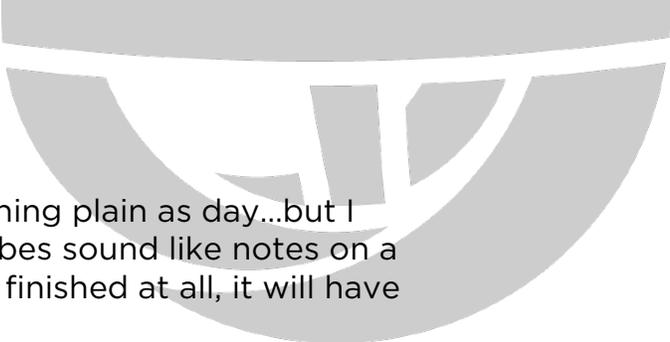
You've probably heard 1 Corinthians 13 read or sung at a wedding. It's commonly referred to as "the love chapter." It lifts the hearts of both the wedding couple and the guest. Notice, though, that the *love chapter* has very little to do with romantic love. In our culture we tend to think of love as a noun. You either have it or you don't. But in this chapter, and in much of the Bible, love is often a verb. It's less about feeling and more about doing.

Paul's *love chapter* was much needed in the city of Corinth. Paul had started a church there. He stayed for 18 months before moving on to Ephesus. As was often the case in Paul's ministry, he left the work in the hands of co-workers. He got periodic reports from them and then dictated letters in response. To put it mildly, things are a mess back in Corinth. Churchgoers are squabbling over any number of things: Is it proper for one believer to take another believer to court? Is it okay to eat meat that's first been sacrificed to an idol? And maybe most troubling of all, how can they worship decently and in order?

The messiness of their worship comes from things like speaking in tongues, sharing words of prophesy, and using wisdom to unlock ancient mysteries. We're not exactly sure how all of this played out, but it was chaotic at best. Imagine the Zumbro Choir singing an anthem. Someone stands up in the middle of it and starts speaking in tongues, and before long others are joining in. The choir eventually has to a stop, whether Bob Giere has stopped moving his arms or not. Just a hunch, but I'm guessing the interruption would not sit well at all. If you read between the lines of First Corinthians, you get the sense that lots of people were going home from worship mad.

Paul's *love chapter* comes right in the middle of a longer discussion about worship (1 Cor. 12-14). Again, Paul is picturing love in practical, active terms. Eugene Peterson, in *The Message* version of the Bible, starts out like this: "If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy, but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's word with power,





revealing all God's mysteries and making everything plain as day...but I don't love, I'm nothing." The actions Paul describes sound like notes on a scale that isn't quite finished. If it's going to get finished at all, it will have to be through love.

Paul doesn't mince words. Keep in mind, his letter would have been read at worship. Lots of toes would have been stepped on. Again from *The Message*: "Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it does not have. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always 'me first,' doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score.... No, love puts up with anything, trusts God always, looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end."

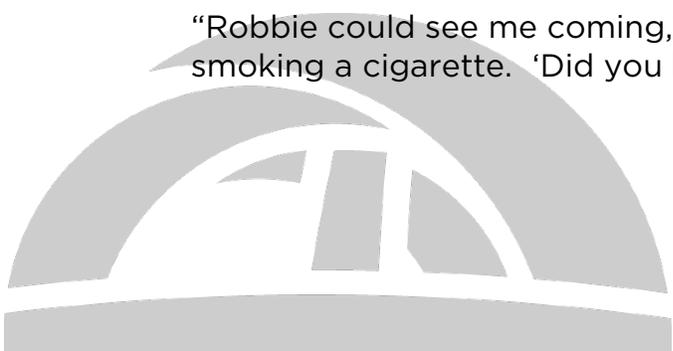
Along about now, many of the Corinthians are probably looking for the exit. They're feeling like Paul has written his letter just to them. Strong as the images are, we need to be careful. Paul's words can easily get turned into a duty; a cold, hard slog towards a seemingly impossible standard. *Love or else you're going to get clobbered by God!*

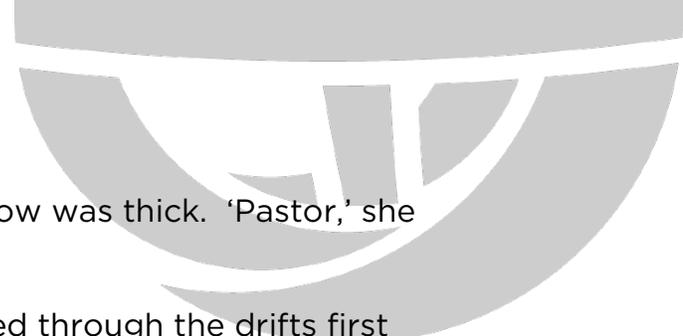
Is that what Paul is saying? Maybe, but I think it's more. Pastor Lawrence Wood tells the story of trying to love a woman in his congregation named Robbie. Robbie had worn out her welcome a long time ago. Her poverty was real, but she lived a hard life and went through any help she received like water.

One day Pastor Wood got a phone call from Robbie. This is how he describes it: "She'd been calling the church repeatedly to ask for groceries. When I picked up the phone, I invited her to come to the food pantry on Monday. She said she didn't have a car. Couldn't someone drive some food out her way? She groaned, 'I haven't had nothing to eat in four days.'"

Pastor Wood continues: "Folks who come to the pantry take whatever we have, but Robbie wanted smoked turkey, lean roast beef, and a pound of coffee—decaf. The day before, a bad storm had dumped a foot of snow on us. Unwilling to saddle anyone else with this request, I trudged down to the food pantry, filled up a couple of sacks of groceries, and drove the 20 miles out to her place, now and then muttering under my breath. The apartment was as awful as you can imagine: a single-story building with peeling paint and a rotted roof. No one had bothered to plow the lot.

"Robbie could see me coming," said the pastor. "She stepped out the door, smoking a cigarette. 'Did you bring me the coffee?' she asked. 'Decaf?' I





stopped about 20 yards from the door. The snow was thick. ‘Pastor,’ she said, ‘could you pull up a little closer?’

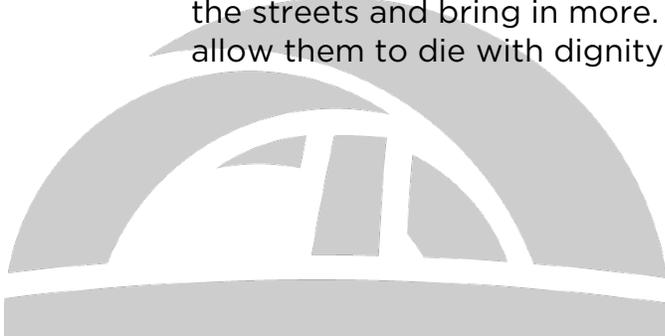
“‘Robbie, just stay there,’ I said curtly, and waded through the drifts first with one sack and then with the other, feeling a twinge in my lower back. Robbie finally smiled at me, but before a conversation could begin, I said, ‘Well, I think that’s about it,’ and I left without asking anything about *her* or what more she might need.” Pastor Wood concludes, “It was not one of my better days. However, I did leave feeling just a little lighter. In spite of myself, I felt glad to have been of help to someone.”

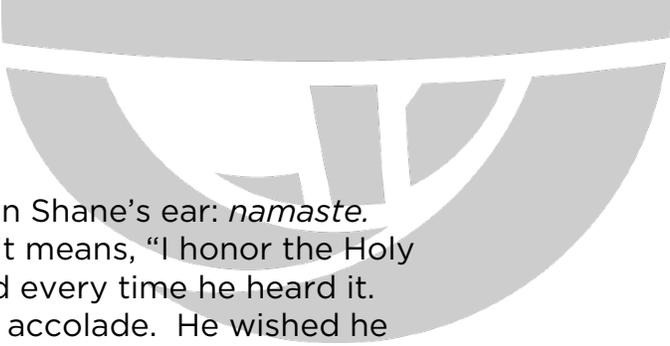
So, what do you think: Did Pastor Wood show love to Robbie? Remember, in the *love chapter* love is less a feeling and more a doing. In that the pastor did something helpful for Robbie, muttering or not, his action seemed like love. Still – and I hate to be too hard on the guy because I’ve been there myself – can we ever get beyond the sense of duty, beyond the cold, hard slog, so we’re aspiring to something more? And if so, where do we start?

Here’s an idea: Paul saw God’s unfinished future breaking into the present in Jesus of Nazareth. You know this story. On the night of his betrayal, Jesus gathered his disciples in the Upper Room. He shared a meal with them and washed their feet. And then he said, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” Jesus was inviting his followers – people like you and me – to spend time with him: to say our prayers, to listen to his words, to take time for worship. When we do these things, he shows us that he loves us more than we know. As we abide in that love, he slowly changes our hearts. And we find more of the love we so badly need, and more of the love the world so badly needs too.

Shane Claiborne paints a picture of what this love might look like. It’s from his book, *The Irresistible Revolution*. Shane tells of a trip he took to Calcutta. He was on a pilgrimage in search of an authentic Christian. He was really hoping to meet up with Mother Theresa, and he did. While he was there, he visited orphanages and clinics and places where Mother Theresa and her helpers were engaged in ministry.

Their actions prompted Shane to roll up his sleeves and get to work. He spent most of his time at the Home for the Destitute and Dying. He helped folks eat their meals. He massaged their aching muscles. He gave them baths. Every day folks would die, and every day workers would go out onto the streets and bring in more. The goal was not to keep people alive, but to allow them to die with dignity, with someone to love them.





Over and over the dying would whisper a word in Shane's ear: *namaste*. There isn't a word for it in English, but basically it means, "I honor the Holy One who lives in you." Shane was deeply moved every time he heard it. And yet he wondered if he was deserving of the accolade. He wished he could do more for these people. But he wasn't a miracle worker like Jesus. He wasn't able to heal the sick or raise the dead.

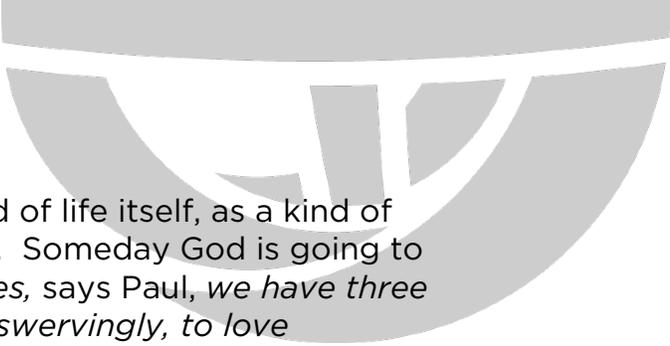
Then one day Shane had a revelation. He realized that the miracles of Jesus were not the most impressive things about his ministry. After all, Jesus raised his friend Lazarus, but a few years later Lazarus died. He fed thousands of people, but the next day they were hungry again. He healed the sick, but eventually they caught some other disease. What had lasting significance in Jesus' ministry were not the miracles; it was the love. And, says Shane, the incredible thing about that love is that now it lives inside of you and me.

Namaste. "I honor the Holy One who lives in you." Can you imagine someone saying that to you? Maybe? Maybe if the love of Jesus comes tumbling out at the right time and in the right way. Here's the truth: the love our culture offers is a fleeting thing. But the love we offer by abiding in Jesus is real and vital. Do you know anyone who could use that love? Who knows, if you share it, they might want to honor the Holy One who lives inside of you.

Friends, we don't have the same challenges as the church in Corinth did, but we have challenges of our own. As we live with them, Paul calls us to love. Whether we're filling up a sack of groceries, serving communion to the homebound, passing out bulletins, making lefse, handing out burritos at Open Table, knitting a prayer shawl, singing in the choir, going on a mission trip, preaching a sermon, or something else entirely, here's the truth: If we don't have love, then whatever it is we're trying to do won't add up to much at all.

It's very important for us to remember this as we move forward in the building discernment process. What does love look like then? It doesn't mean we won't have differences of opinion, but hopefully we will share them as constructively as possible. It doesn't mean everyone will get exactly what they want, but hopefully we'll be able to make the most of whatever gets decided. Plain and simple, we need to do this project in love, and to work out our differences in love, just as those Corinthians had to work out their differences in love. And if it's hard, then we better spend more time abiding in Jesus along the way.





Keep in mind, Paul describes the call of love, and of life itself, as a kind of unfinished scale. It's calling us into God's future. Someday God is going to play the last note. *Until that completeness comes, says Paul, we have three things to do: to trust steadily in God, to hope unswervingly, to love extravagantly. And the greatest of these is love. (The Message).*

To me, that sounds like more than our duty. It sounds like our destiny. May God make it so for us. Amen.

