



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

Love Holds All Together

by Pr. John Strommen

on I Corinthians 13:1-13 (and Mark 12:28-31)
on Sunday, May 17, 2020 (6th Sunday of Easter)

Where does one usually hear these verses read? Weddings! In fact, for many of us, these verses are virtually synonymous with weddings, perfectly capturing the mood, where there is already so much love in the air!

I know, there *are* those weddings where everyone's holding their breath, but those are another matter.

It may surprise you to know that the context for these verses, taken from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, is nothing like the context of a wedding. In fact, it couldn't be more different. Far from an adoring couple standing at the altar declaring unwavering devotion to each other, the Corinthian church was no love fest. In I Corinthians 13, Paul declares love as the greatest power in the universe to a community that is practically devoid of love. And his words were probably quite controversial, because he suggests that many of the things that the Corinthians hold dear amount to nothing...without love. But this is precisely why I Corinthians 13 was – and is – so powerful. It reminds us who we are as human beings who are made in the image of God. It reminds us what finally matters.

And whereas the love we celebrate at weddings is often thought to be a feeling, the love Paul speaks about is a bit more blue collar: it's not about feeling, but about rolling up your sleeves and doing the right thing for someone else's benefit.

Let's explore what was going in the Corinthian church when Paul wrote this letter. Maybe we'll even find points of connection with our world.

Meet the city of Corinth, after Athens, the other major Greek city. Corinth was a city of government and commerce, large and diverse. It was known for - how do we put this? - drinking and sex. It was "party central." It was also known for its factions and strife amongst various groups. The Christian church in Corinth reflected its city.

Among the many fault lines within the Corinthian church were *morality and behavior*. From drunkenness at the Lord's Supper to sex scandals, there were all kinds of reasons in this church one *might not* qualify for the church council!

There were divisions of class. The Lords' Supper was often shared first as a meal, a time of fellowship, food, and drink. Unfortunately, the rich would get there first while the poor were still attempting to make a living and they would eat all the food. This, even though many poor people were counting on this meal because they had little at home to eat! Really thoughtful, rich people.

Some would say this is a microcosm of the world.

There were fault lines of *allegiance*. Some followed Paul, some Apollo, some Cephas. And every once in a while, someone like Paul had to remind them that, *actually*, they all followed Christ!

There were divisions over proper *practice*. Must Gentile converts be circumcised? Traditionalists said yes, progressives said no – along with Gentile males, of course. Bitter battle here.

And often the Corinthian Christians had disputes between them over all kinds of things that ended up in pagan courts.

But maybe the biggest division within this church was around *spiritual gifts*. Yes, gifts given by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of building up the body of Christ. So, many people thought whatever gift they had made them not complimentary to the rest, but superior. This was especially true for those who had the gifts of speaking in tongues, prophecy, and knowledge. And usually when people feel superior, their humanity goes out the window.

Can you see parallels in the Corinthian world to our own? Where there is discord around class, ethnicity, morals, practices, ideologies and beliefs? Where there are fierce allegiances to different leaders that falsely divide us?

Now, one might say that the problem was too *much diversity*. Create churches where everyone is the same and has the same point of view. Or, some might say, create a nation like that! To which Paul repeatedly responded, "wrong!" The body of Christ is supposed to be diverse. Certainly the human race is. The answer to our problems comes from somewhere else, in a binding force that somehow unites us in the midst of our diversity.

Can you see the need for Paul's message today? Unlike for a wedding, Paul's "poetic ode to love" was not written to celebrate the unifying love already present in the community, because there was precious little of it. It was a call to action, an intervention to embrace and practice the transcendent power of love. It was – and

is – the only way a people can survive the muddy, turbulent waters of difference and disagreement. So, this was a challenging word from Paul, not meant to make everyone feel good, but to look in the mirror and grow up, and *open up* to something much higher.

And so, writes Paul, *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*. In other words, if you have the gift of speaking in tongues – a very coveted gift for them - but do not love, your gift is worthless. Ditto, prophetic powers, knowledge, *even faith*. If you don't have love, your gifts are for naught, for gifts only matter if they contribute to the health of the body of Christ, to the common good, to the human family, to something universal in scope.

Think about it, even faith becomes empty without love. It becomes self-righteous - and dangerous!

Think of what happens in many families where the parents insist on having their kids get involved in every program, league or camp they can – you know, so their child has a chance to succeed, make it into the best school, or maybe just keep up with the Joneses' kids. But if those kids acquire all kinds of skills and knowledge, but have not love, they are being raised to be a noisy gong. Maybe they ought to spend more time at a food shelf with their parents, not at another tournament.

I was once in an argument with a distant in-law at a family wedding, of all things, about the value to society of someone who is wealthy. He was arguing that a rich person has intrinsic value to us all because he/she has the ability to make money. I was less convinced. Making money doesn't have intrinsic value – other than financial. What matters is what the person does with the money. Do they care about their neighbor and use their resources to help make the world a better place? If not, all we have here is a clanging cymbal.

So, what then, is love? Americans think love is a feeling. At weddings, this is how we think of love. But this is not what Paul is talking about here. Whatever you may be feeling in the moment may lead you into something very different than love! For instance, you may not *feel like* changing that diaper at 4am, but that's what love does.

Or, conversely, you may *feel like* clocking someone, but that's not what love does.

Love in I Corinthians 13 is *agape* love, and it means a commitment on the part of the person who loves to act in the interests of and for the sake of the other, sometimes sacrificially. What actions or words help my neighbor's life to flourish?

Or my wife's? That is agape love. Never abstract, merely a feeling, or an idea. **It is action.** As Forrest Gump might say, "love is as love does."

Biblical scholar Shively Smith says, "Make no mistake. The love Paul is talking about here is not passive and fluffy. This kind of love is an up at dawn, feet on the ground, tools in hand, working kind of love. It builds communities. It nurtures positive social interactions."

Paul writes memorably at the end of this passage that while we muddle through this world with incomplete knowledge and only see life as if dimly in a mirror, there are three things that have ultimate value, that matter most: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love. Why? Maybe because faith and hope are based on love; love *is the reason* we have faith and hope. Think about it. Why do we have faith in God and hope for the future? Because we believe God loves us. If God is not loving, faith and hope would wither. Without a loving God, we're either on our own to fend for ourselves or we have to somehow impress an indifferent God.

I sometimes have discussions with people who believe in a higher power of some kind, an energy field of sorts, but cannot bring themselves to believe in a personal God who chooses to love. That's somehow making God too small or too much like us, they say.

But to my way of thinking, everything sinks or swims on *love*. Think about what we believe in - a God who *would not* leave us to our own harmful devices, but came down here to be with us - even suffer and die - all so that we would know *that we are loved*, and that love is more powerful than hate, *and, therefore*, hope wins out over despair, life breaks free from death. If we believe that love holds all this together, there must be *one who loves*. Not an energy field or force; a being of some kind who chooses to love us. God.

We struggle so much in this world with fear, and it drives us to behave badly. "Perfect love drives out fear," scripture teaches us. Indeed it does, and it creates faith and hope, and fertile soil for more love to be shared.

This is the love that comes our way. This is the love we are asked to embody in our lives. Amen.