

Love Will Keep Us Together – Searching Out God’s Love

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Ooooh, Paul is on a roll today! This is probably one of his most well-known passages in the New Testament scriptures. It’s certainly one of his most passionate and straight-forward passages. While Paul spends much time with tongue-in-cheek wit and sarcastically flavored oratory, this passage – filled with imagery and metaphor – is as serious as they come. It’s this passage, Paul’s understanding of the nature of one who follows the one almighty God and who lives in the example of Christ that forms the foundation of his faith.

How many of you have heard that a true Christian is one who loves Jesus? Have you ever heard that a true Christian is one who loves like Jesus? Because that’s the message of Paul. Notice that in his entire explanation of love, love is not some lighthearted notion. In fact, love is the very thing that balances all else. Listen closely...

“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.” There is power in speech, my friends...we all know that. What we say matters. What we say determines our relationships. What we say defines us to those who listen. But when what we say is not first founded in love for those we say things to, we are nothing but a noisemaker, spewing words not of God or Christ out into the world. We become unlike Christ, we stop loving like Christ, and we fill the world around us with the shadows of our fears, our greed, our lack of faith. When we are grounded in love, we fill the world with light.

Paul goes on, “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, I am nothing. 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 gain nothing.” How many of you have known people of faith who would regard a beggar on the street as lazy or attempting to cheat the system by not getting a job? How many of us have known someone who boasts at the amount of money they give a charity, but then turn around and speak ill of those who have need for the charity? I once heard a learned man who had many funds to offer a charitable organization bemoan all he had given...presumably, he gave out of his own generosity and benefitted in the giving...but when asked about the charity, he judged them as mismanaging HIS money because he didn't agree with the direction the charity went. Friends, this has over and over and over again to organizations trying to do good. Paul names this...for if we give everything we have away, but don't love those who receive it, we never let go of what we gave and in turn we gain nothing. In fact, we will lose part of ourselves in the process and then fester up with resentment at those who received from our giving.

Now, given that we're coming up fast on Valentine's Day, and we are all being bombarded with Jewelry commercials and chocolate commercials and rows and rows of teddy bears with treats at every turn, it's necessary to know what it is we talk about when we consider love...especially God's love, the love we are to have for our neighbor, and the love we must find for ourselves.

The Greek term in the letter Paul writes is agape. Agape is that all-encompassing love that reaches beyond our own longings and desires and into our sense of the rightness of God's creation. This love is not

limited to us and God, but is infused in us by God to share with ourselves and with others. This is not eros – that infatuated, desirous, longing kind of love that Valentine’s Day hopes to wield through marketing; playing on our desire to not be alone, to have someone that’s “ours” – as if we can be owned by one another. This is not philia [fileeeah] – that friendship, fraternal kind of love that binds us together through comradery and play. This is not storge [storgay] – the love as of a parent for a child, tied together through life with an invisible cord.

Agape is love that’s not an obligation, not an infatuation, not a brotherly bond...Agape is a chosen love; irresistible, forgiving, filled with the reality of things and alive in us regardless of what else is going on. Paul describes this love for us. This is a love filled with patience and kindness. It’s love that does not inspire envy or boasting or arrogance or rudeness. This love does not insist on it’s own way, is not irritable or resentful and does not rejoice in wrongdoing. This love Paul brings forth to our attention is a love that is, in many ways, hard to find...mostly because it’s not ever been lost, but has been rejected by our need to be right, to be powerful and to be important. It’s hard to locate because it’s buried so deeply within us that we shudder at the thought of loving ourselves enough to shed light on such love for others.

Almost everyone wants at some point in their lives to feel important, regarded, respected. This love Paul speaks of exists in us in spite of those longings. This kind of love requires that we be vulnerable. Not in the sense that we place ourselves in danger, but in that we love without any expectation of receiving and become one who is constantly giving away. According to this world, however, when we constantly

give away, we will eventually run out of things to give...we will run out of love.

The church in Corinth would not have received this message from Paul if the church wasn't in need of it. And we, church, still are in need.

We need to embrace that love in Christ's community "rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." This love never ends. And this love is eternally available to and created by none other than each one of us.

Jesus encountered a moment of unfriendliness in our passage today. He was among brothers and sisters in faith when he read the scrolls of Isaiah for those gathered. He was filled with the love that Paul speaks of...and he gives us an example of what to do when that love isn't returned.

If you recall, last week, we heard about Jesus reading in the temple. He is recognized as a member of the community. He read part of the prophecy, then finished with "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He sat down, and a murmur began. Is this not the son of Joseph? They might as well have asked, "Is this not the snot-nosed kid who used to run around here bouncing around like a hyena?" They have no love for this child of their community. They respect him, they welcome him into the community of faith, but they have no love for him...not the love that Paul describes.

Jesus then tells them the truth about their desires. Here's the thing about desires...they're often full of self-satisfying wants and self-aggrandizing expectations. This community is waiting for a messiah...a king to rally them and conquer the nation that conquered them. To

end their enslavements in all ways. To rectify the need among them by eliminating poverty and suffering. It would be wonderful even now to have these things...to have a ruler or a God who simply erases the unhappy realities of suffering and poverty and inequality in this world. But Jesus knows the truth of their desires and he gives them a reality check. He reminds them that even in the time of the prophet, when the power of God stood among them through word and guidance, there was poverty, there was need, and there was suffering. Jesus' presence as messiah does not change that such things exist. And it's not Jesus who needs to address it, but the entire body of believers.

Well, no more than we might like to hear that message, neither did the people of Nazareth and they forced Jesus out of the temple, onto the street, and far up onto a cliff. For his reckless love and honesty, Jesus is threatened with death. That cliff was the length to which the people would go with Jesus. But they didn't throw him off. Instead, having reached their limit with him, the scripture says Jesus "passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

We have many of us been taken to that cliff in the name of what is right and righteous. Many of us have faced the drop...some have even toppled off the edge and suffered the injury that the fall caused. But it's Jesus who reaches beyond the intent of those around him and around us that seek to topple us and shows us the love of God through patience, kindness, endurance and hope. He makes his way peacefully from the crowd...reaching out to us from the edge to join him. And he continued on his way in his own search for God's love among our siblings in faith. This agape love is what keeps us together – joined with God, self-aware and appreciative, and connected to our community in Christ. It's a choice, and it's the greatest gifts we have to draw on.

As you continue with this community to search for yourself within the mystery of Christ, make the love Jesus shows us and Paul describes a cornerstone of your journey. Love your God – it's a choice. Love yourself – that's a choice, too. Love one another – again, a choice. In choosing to love, we are bound to one another and are given the ability to seek and create peace, hope, and joy.

After all, Paul taught us and teaches us still that “faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” Amen.