August 21, 2016

1 Corinthians 13

Love

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

1 Corinthians 13 New Revised Standard Version

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. 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. 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. 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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When 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. For 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Those words from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians are so familiar, Paul was writing to a group of people who were fed up with each other, disappointed in each other, and wounded by each other. He was writing to a community of believers that was in major turmoil and conflict. Richer members of the church eating communion before the poorer members could arrive, and some bragging about who baptized them, or the best game of all – I am a better believer than you are.

They were actively trying to throw each other out of the community of faith. So Paul holds up a mirror, so they could hopefully see the difference from how they were acting with each other and the way that God called them to act as the body of Christ. Paul wanted them to figure out how to love one another in the community of faith, so that they could then love their neighbor in the larger world. Paul is being challenging, provocative and pointed in his words.

The thing about love is that it is not just about words or a feeling. Love is an action. You may not be able to notice it in the English translation, but in the Greek, it is verb after verb after verb. In verses 4-7, there are 16 different verbs about love. It is a closer translation to Paul’s meaning if we say love bears patiently, love shows kindness. Love does. Love acts. In the Message translation Eugene Peterson translates Paul’s words in this way, “Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t 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 of the sins of others, doesn’t revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end.” The passage ends by saying “Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly.”

One of the amazing things about the Bible is the people that God uses to do good in the world. God chooses people who are afraid, God uses people who are flawed. Think about Moses, he was terrified and convinced God he needed a spokesman to help speak to the Pharoah. We can trust God to show up in our weakness. When we are weak, God is strong. “I am weak but Thou art strong; Jesus, keep me from all wrong; I'll be satisfied as long as I walk, let me walk close to Thee.” The goal is to identity and embrace our weaknesses, and trust God to show up in those places and be strong with and for us. Be strong, have courage, and rely on your faith in God. We also need a community of people and God's grace and strength to illuminate, embolden, and empower us to deal with our weaknesses.

 School is starting tomorrow for many. It is a fresh start. Nothing has gone wrong yet, nobody is behind on their assignments yet. It seems like every time we start something new in our lives, the excitement tends to share space with our fear. We might feel that shared space with fear and excitement when we start a new job or move to a new place, or start a new project. Our scripture from 1 Corinthians reminds us that a follower of Jesus has knowledge of the truth with love, great faith with love, and sacrificial generosity with love.

The love that Paul is describing is God’s kind of love. It is a gift without any thought of a return. Unconditional, free gift from God. It is freely given with no thought of a response. Love is what love does.

Brenda Mathus and Carol Brown are two folks here who do love well at Greenland Hills. Our newest member Byron Proutt shared with me that a greeting and hug from Brenda at the front door was a huge part of him joining the church. Byron said it was the simple things, Brenda would make him feel like she was excited to see him. Carol Brown is one of our church trustees and a few Sunday afternoons ago she was getting dressed in blue jeans to mow the alley. I remember looking at Carol and saying out loud, “It is too hot to be mowing today!” But she did because Brenda and Carol love this church and love is a verb.

You may have seen the heartbreaking image this week of the Syrian boy covered in ash, bloodied and dazed in the back of an ambulance. Or seen the pictures of flooded homes in Lousiana. You may have thought, what can I do? Love is a verb. We can send relief supply kits or donate generously through the United Methodist Committee on Relief. We can pray. We can write letters to our representatives urging humanitarian support. When we do love, we show our strength and practice what we preach.

A week ago Friday I visited David Culp because the doctors had told him that there was nothing more that they could do for him. 10 months ago he was diagnosed with a particularly aggressive prostate cancer. As I prepared to visit David and Laura I thought of their wedding day in this place, I thought about the baptism of their beautiful child Bonnie. Two days ago, David passed away at his house with Laura at his side. The night before sweet Bonnie who will be 2 in December, crawled onto her dad’s bed and said, “I love you,” to her daddy. No one had taught Bonnie how to say I love you and she had started saying those words just a few days before.

Every morning may we ask God to help us be loving with everything we think, everything we say, everything we do. May we recommit our lives to do love this day. May we wake up every day asking God to help us do love. If you ask what can I do? Try this, ask God each morning to help you do love. Then listen. Just listen. The answer will be there. The love Paul talks about is a verb. An action verb, the first action we need to take is to listen.