

If you are familiar with this chapter from the Bible it might be because you have heard it read at weddings. Because it has so much to say concerning love, couples have chosen it for their wedding day. And it does have good things to say to couples about what love is and is not.

Though, it is evident from its location in this letter that Paul was writing not to married couples, but primarily to the church. In chapter 12 Paul has just written about spiritual gifts that God gives individuals and the church. He is concerned about disputes in the church over which gift is more important, and who is closer to God or more correctly living life in Christ. As Chandler helped us realize a few weeks ago, when we sang “head shoulders knees and toes”, Paul taught that everyone with their unique gifts and abilities, all the different people make up the parts of the body – the body of Christ – which is the church. He teaches us that everyone with all the gifts God has given is very important to being the church.

Seek out the gifts that you have and that are growing in you, he says, but there is something even more excellent than even the finest gift.

And that is his last word before this chapter begins.

Paul makes this chapter on love the pinnacle of his sermon about the church – about all the gifts and people in the church – he makes this chapter his trump card. He is making a big point – “remember what this is all about,” he is saying. “Remember what it is that brought you into this fellowship and this spiritual life in the first place.” In the quest to be the church, and to be a follower of Christ, nothing is more important than love.

Back in January at the community Martin Luther King celebration a man was invited to preach. His sermon was good, and he knew how to move the crowd in ways I do not know, and within a congregation that responds in ways we have not tried. I would say he was powerful – or exhibited power. And there were some people who responded to him and to the choir in ways that were stunning – they had to be attended to and held onto. It was different from what we have here. I admit I feel a bit intimidated by that display. It was wonderful and the diversity of people in that service was evident of a powerful love. It is important to have a way to understand what was going on.

Paul writes – “If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” So, no matter

how we worship, high energy or quiet contemplation; whether the preacher is a polished and astute orator, or a fiery spirited evangelist or somewhere in between; whether the music is traditional or contemporary, the only true potent element in the mix is love. Is love in it? Does love cover over the rough spots? Does love fill in the missing pieces?

When he lists these other things, prophetic powers, understanding of mysteries, knowledge and faith, I hear him saying to our day, that passion for social justice is important, and a deep and transforming prayer life is important, and knowledge of the Bible and theology and science and technique are important, and faith as the surety of belief, as exhibition of activity in the church, and as the accepted body of doctrine, these all are important, too. And yet love is the only unshifting foundation, the bedrock.

As important as all these gifts and attributes are, in our human hands these things too often can become an end in themselves. The person who learns to practice these things the best and with the most ability is to be honored. But love is before all these things. Love is what gives these gifts and abilities any lasting and effective meaning at all. Love is what remains when all these gifts have passed away.

I witnessed a kind of parable in my neighborhood this past summer. My neighbor lost his job in the late spring. He is old enough to retire, but I don't know if he can retire or not. He is full of energy but could find no work. He had been looking at the vacant lots across the street from our houses and thought how he might be able to clean them up a bit. He thought it would look nicer from his windows and it would improve the neighborhood. So he went up to the office of the people who manage our development to ask their permission to do this project. They offered to have a crew come through with chainsaws and skid loaders and in a matter of hours wipe these lots clean.

Our neighbor thanked the folks for their generous offer, but he wanted to do it, he needed something to do, and he had an idea about how to do it. So, they agreed to let him work the lots. So, every day he went out there with a rake and lopping shears and other implements. He carefully pulled vines and poison ivy out of the trees and cleared away beneath them, then mowed it even. It took him a month in the heat, but not one sapling or mature tree was harmed, and the space below the trees

greened into a lovely space. And when he was done, it looked like it had always been like that – tended and green and shady and pretty.

When love is what is at work the object of love can be transformed in a beautiful and natural kind of way. When Jesus enters our life the dirty broken self that we are is not killed off; our uniqueness as creatures of God is not obliterated; but the love of Christ works on us from the inside out, transforming us, tearing down the vines and weeds that diminish our God-given self, and the beautiful growth that is natural to who we are born to be, the image of God that is in us, is made to flourish. Christ the gardener has come. Tender and careful love is given and that is what makes us different.

In several very real and powerful seasons of my life I have experienced the love of Christ in ways that restore in me the calling I believe I received. Sometimes, though, in the ongoing conversation in my conscience, my managerial self over functions and I think that administration is more important than love; or improving communication, or organizing and planning worship, or trying to make people happy; but then the voice of Christ sometimes squeezes into my interior boardroom and restores me to my right mind and heart: telling me that I am loved not

because of what I do or accomplish, not because of any gifts I have, and that the church's central task is to find and follow that most excellent way. The way of love.

Love pays attention to people, in the reality of their lives, in their everydayness. Love recognizes when someone is missing, when someone is not included, love sees that someone is standing aside, realizes that there is a voice that is not being heard. Love rejects the many reasons and rationale we might employ to excuse our unloving action or to blame someone for their own hurting. Love goes the extra mile, responds to the gut level tug to make that phone call we put off, carries the casserole into the enemy's kitchen, listens to what one disagrees with, and speaks the truth as love sees it without anger. As it says, love never ends.

A Bible scholar once said that in this chapter a person could replace the word love with the word Christ and it would make sense. And, indeed, as we know, Jesus made love for other people his aim. If there is a compelling reason for using this passage in a wedding it is because the love spoken of here is not love that builds itself up and gets off on itself, it is love that exists for the other person, a love that is satisfied only because the

other person knows the love that is given, and rejoices because that love makes it possible for that person to change in life-giving ways.

When Jesus gathered his disciples for his last supper with them he said – this is my body given for you. This is my blood poured out for you. That is the love that is being described here. He said it in many ways: I came not to be served but to serve. I came that you might have life and have it fully. And he said, love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than to give one's life for one's friends.

Paul told the Corinthians what we all need to remember. We have one central task that defines who we are – and it is to strive to know the love of Christ and to love others with it. Amen.