

## “Love Builds Up”

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1 Corinthians 13

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup> but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

She was a no-nonsense woman who taught history and social studies, who lived through cancer and through widowhood. She was a devout Christian who lived her faith every day. And she made the best biscuits you'd ever want to eat.

What person have you looked up to? Whose face pops up when you ask yourself about mentors, teachers or others who have influenced your life?

For me, it's Grace Schafer. At sixty-five, she had retired from teaching in Oklahoma. Then she came to visit her son in Shiprock. They needed teachers and she stayed, teaching for another five years, even after David left. She expected her high schoolers to do their best. Their best was often subpar. But like students today in Wausau, many of them were second-language learners, and their home lives might leave us wondering how they could focus on learning at all.

Grace was so proud when one former student made a point of coming to see her while home from the army and told her, “Of all the teachers I didn't like, I didn't like you the least.”

Grace Shafer had many gifts and she shared them willingly with her family, her friends and her students. But what made her special, what made it all matter, was that Grace loved.

In recent weeks, we have talked about the ways in which God prepares us and gifts us to be the Church. We have different ways of approaching tasks. Some of us take ideas and shape them. Others put them into action. Some notice God's vision for us and point the way. Others tell us why this is God's way for us. While still others plan the steps to get us where we're being led.

We talked about gifts we each have. Dick has facility with numbers, Jen with words. Bonnie is full of kindness, Margaret is impassioned for justice. Karen works with children, Charlie with older adults. We were reminded that no one has all the gifts and that we need each other and the gifts that we each bring so that we can be about God's vision for us.

As I ended last week, I said there was still one more piece to this puzzle. That piece is love. First Church can do great things but without love we might as well be a social club.

Paul – the writer of today’s lesson – preaches and writes well. He has great faith and can convincingly argue why Jesus Christ is Lord. He speaks in tongues, which is important to the people of Corinth and to some people today. This is basically what he writes in that first paragraph. But even with all his gifts, he says, if he does not have love, he is nothing!

Love is the number-one essential piece of a faithful life. Using himself as an example, Paul writes that all his extraordinary gifts, grand abilities and skills, and extravagant actions – which his readers would have known about first-hand – are just so much noise, without love.

He’s making his case to a church that has let itself get caught up in secondary things. In the style of a familiar 1<sup>st</sup> century rhetorical pattern, he continues by describing love’s character and how it functions, first what it *is* – Love waits with patience; it’s kind and merciful – then what it’s not – It’s not jealous or boastful or puffed up. It doesn’t seek its own purposes. It doesn’t keep a record of wrongs. Then he goes over the top completely, saying, “Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”<sup>i</sup>

Does this make you squirm like it does me? Who can live by this measure?!

Paul’s description here lays out a kind of “running forgiveness” that we need in order to sustain any long-term relationship. It also sets up love as the framework in which life’s challenges are met. Love can do this because it always involves another. Love is never solo. It’s always about linking oneself to another.

Paul continues making his case by comparing love to other virtues. Faith and hope also come from God. Hope is that yearning of the heart for God’s better way. Faith is right relation with God. Yet love is the essence of God. And by loving, believers connect with God, participate with God, in a special way. Love never ends because God’s love never ends, and this is the basis for all human love.<sup>ii</sup>

I read a book last year called *Return to Love* that makes a good case for the idea that everything we do comes either from a place of love or a place of fear. Fear is the ego voice that says if we do this or give that we won’t have enough. It’s what causes us to hold too closely to relationships or to avoid going too deeply.

Love, on the other hand, is what helps us to care about the other even when there’s nothing in it for us. It allows us to be gentle with each other and to trust that most of us are just doing the best we can in that moment.<sup>iii</sup> As I was writing today’s message, it came to me that while the author is not a Christian, her words echo much of what we read today in Paul’s letter about being patient and kind, hopeful and joyful, and not acting proud or irritable.

How often does fear get in the way of our living as God would have us live – individually or as a church? Where does fear interfere with our relationship with loved ones? or strangers? or even enemies? In what ways does self-protection keep us from living as God wants us to live?

“Some researchers at Yale [University] discovered that when people holding traditionally conservative views engaged in an intense imagination exercise in which a genie granted them absolute physical safety, within minutes they began to think like their more liberal counterparts” extending concern for the other.<sup>iv</sup>

When we operate from a place of love, we are more open to the other, more open to the ones close to us. Why would we want anything else? To come to love, though, we need to accept that we can choose whether we will live from a place of fear or whether we will intentionally and repeatedly choose to live from a place of love. Fear is the default so we need to decide, and keep deciding, to live in love.

I stayed in my marriage for years because of fear of being alone. If I left all that I had worked so hard at, I would be alone, probably forever. I knew this long before I understood about why I have to work so hard to seem caring or polite or attentive. And I was operating from a place of fear; there was no room for love. Since long-term caring relationships need love as a framework, when any of us try to make something work by sheer dint of will, we are, as Paul writes, like banging drums and cymbals.

It is easy for us to value the wrong things, even in the church. We value productivity and effectiveness over spirituality and caring. We want people in the pews more than transformed lives. Recruiting members takes precedent over growing as disciples. Buildings are often valued more than service and servant-leadership.

Earlier I asked if this reality-check about what truly matters makes you squirm. We mess up; we all do. We cannot live completely in love until we are perfected in love. That's how John and Charles Wesley, two founders of the Methodist movement, referred to growing entirely into what God knows we can be. It's a lifetime's effort that takes practice.

Four weeks ago, we remembered our baptism. We reminded ourselves that baptism is a God-gift, an equipping first step in a lifelong quest to love God and all our neighbors completely.

When we ask ourselves how we are doing, we need to base our response on how well we have loved the way God loves us, the way Christ loves, to ask where and how can we practice love even more profoundly.

This is Paul's message. And this is God's call for us.

So, as we pray our BTP, we need to ask God to help us get ourselves out of the way so that we can not only notice God's great intention for us, but also put it into practice in love. When we sit in a study or a meeting, when we're tossing salad, moving chairs, washing laundry at the shelter or whatever else, we need to check in with ourselves. Am I doing this in love? When we're at home cleaning up one more mess, when we're arguing or eating or helping with homework, am I doing this in love?

When we act from a place of love, how much more will God be able to do with us?!

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. X, 950-5.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles*, HarperPaperbacks, 1993.

<sup>iv</sup> Molly Baskette, "Fear Not for the Body," StillSpeaking Daily Devotional, January 28, 2019, [ucc.org/daily\\_devotional\\_fear\\_not\\_for\\_the\\_body?utm\\_campaign=dd\\_jan28\\_19&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=unitedchurchofchrist](http://ucc.org/daily_devotional_fear_not_for_the_body?utm_campaign=dd_jan28_19&utm_medium=email&utm_source=unitedchurchofchrist) (last viewed January 31, 2019).