

"Luv or Love?" A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
February 3, 2019, Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Charlton plays the wedding recessional for a few measures.

Did that music sound familiar? When do you often hear that music played? Yes, at the end of a wedding. When do you often hear the reading from First Corinthians, chapter 13 that I just read? Yes, at a wedding.

This chapter from First Corinthians might be Paul's most well-known writing. Many people have heard these verses read at a wedding. And a few of you may remember that it's read every three years during on the fourth Sunday after Epiphany. Epiphany, the Sunday we celebrate and remember the visit from the magi to the Christ-child signifying that Christ came into the world for all people's salvation.

And what do most people think of when they hear Paul's words about love? Most likely romantic love – because of these verses being read so often at weddings. Ah, how lovely: love is patient, love is kind, love does not insist on its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. Excellent advice to be giving the couple that's getting married, especially about being kind and not insisting on your own way. If these descriptions of love were followed by the couple, there'd be a lot fewer divorces!

But is marital love the type of love that Paul is talking about? No.

This reading about love follows what Paul wrote about spiritual gifts and how they are to be used – and on the church being a body that works together with no one part being more important than another. Now, Paul, in his writing, zeros in on the main thing – love. Paul would say that if we don't use our spiritual gifts in love, then we're misusing them. **And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.** Loving others as Christ would love trumps every other action that a Christ-follower may engage in.

When you hear the word love, what comes to mind? Because of the daily messages we read and hear, many people tend to think about love and what's in it for them. Will other people love me if I do this or that?

Ole went to the doctor for a physical. After examining him, the doctor said, "Ole, I've got some bad news for you. You're very sick and have only a few weeks to live."

Ole went home with a heavy heart to tell Lena the news. Without a word, Lena went into the kitchen. Before long, a heavenly aroma came from the kitchen. Lena was making his favorite cookies.

"Lena must really love me," Ole said to himself. He went into the kitchen and reached for one of the cookies.

Lena slapped his hand away and said, "Get away! Dese cookies aren't for you. Der for da funeral!"

Obviously, Lena was NOT thinking about her love for Ole! She was planning ahead, hoping for love from others for the fine cookies the sad widow made for the funeral. If you worry if others will love you, you can change your way of thinking from what's in it for me, to what's in it for God.

When you hear the word love, what comes to mind? We live in a world where we measure just about everything. On our wrists we wear a watch that measures our steps. After the new year, we measure our calories. Some of us measure our cholesterol, our heart rate, our blood pressure. Every day we read another poll or survey that quantifies some part of our lives.

The danger for us is to think that we can quantify love, we can measure love, that love can be used like a statistic to fix someone or to save someone, to convince someone. That is not the kind of love Paul is talking about. There is no scale to quantify or measure the love Paul is speaking of. That is not the type of love Paul is writing about. You can't measure God's love for us.

The love that Paul describes is unconditional. It's the love that God and Christ have for each and every person in this world. It's the love we saw demonstrated in Christ's life. What does that look like?

It looks like healing people who are hurt. It looks like feeding people who are hungry. It looks like loving people who are shunned. It looks like defending people who are overwhelmed. It looks like friends sharing food together. It looks like grieving over the loss of a friend. It looks like a conversation over a drink of cool water. It looks like helping the lost find meaning in life. (Mark Sandlin, "God did not kill Jesus on the cross for our sins," Patheos, March 31, 2015, patheos.com.)

When you hear the word love, what comes to mind? Have you ever considered that God's unconditional love takes away one's power? We tend to negotiate with other people about how much we will love them— how much, how often. That gives us power – or at least we think we have power.

Listen to this story: Tom's 6-year-old son, Benjamin, protested his bedtime. Frustrated by his father's refusal to budge, Benjamin finally became so frustrated that he said, "Daddy, I hate you!"

Tom replied, "I'm sorry you feel that way, Ben, but I love you."

And then what do you think Benjamin said? "Oh, it's okay." Or maybe, "Sorry, Dad. I love you, too." Nope.

When Tom told his son that he loved him, Benjamin yelled back, "Don't say that!"

Surprised, Tom continued, "But, Ben, but it's true — I love you."

"Don't say that, Daddy."

"But I love you, Ben."

“Stop saying that, Daddy! Stop saying it right now!”

“Benjamin, now listen to me: I love you ... like it or not!”

Even at 6 years old, Benjamin realized that in the face of unconditional love he was powerless. If Tom had been willing to negotiate — “I’ll love you if you go to bed nicely” — then Benjamin would have been a player: “Okay, this time, but I’m not eating my vegetables at dinner tomorrow.” But once Tom refused to negotiate, refused to make his love for his son conditional on something Benjamin did, then Ben could do nothing but accept or flee that love.

The same is true with us. If God makes God’s great love for the world and us **conditional**, then we, suddenly, have tremendous power. We can negotiate. We can threaten to reject God’s love. We can even tell God to go take a hike if we don’t care for God’s terms. But when God just loves us — completely and **unconditionally** — and when God just goes and dies for us, well, then the jig is up; there’s just nothing we can do to influence God. (David Lose, “Like it or not,” sermon on John 3:14-21, posted on Day1.org for 4th Sunday in Lent, Year B, March 18, 2012. Retrieved July 25, 2018.)

Love means giving up power – or the power we think we have. Jesus could have called on an army of angels to save him from death on the cross, but he didn’t because he loves you and me. Jesus could have used his divine power when Satan tempted him and offered Jesus the world. But Jesus chose to save the world by exercising his love for you and me.

When you hear the word love, what comes to mind? I pray that you think of God’s unconditional love for you. As a Christ-follower, I pray that you accept God’s unconditional love for you and respond in faith by loving others unconditionally. Billy Graham said it this way: “It is the Holy Spirit’s job to convict, God’s job to judge and my job to love.”

Conditional, unconditional? This coming week observe your behavior toward the folks you encounter. Do you love them unconditionally or are there strings attached? If there’s more conditional in your love than unconditional begin by making one or two changes and grow your love for others. Start simply – it only takes a spark.

I reminded of the song, Pass It On:

It only takes a spark
To get a fire going
And soon all those around
Can warm up in the glowing

That’s how it is with God’s love
Once you’ve experienced it
You’ll spread His love
To everyone
You’ll want to pass it on

I wish for you my friend
This happiness that I’ve found
You can depend on Him
It matters not where you’re bound

I’ll shout it from the mountain top

I want the world to know
The Lord of Love
Has come to me
I want to pass it on

I’ll shout it from the mountain top
I want the world to know
The Lord of Love
Has come to me
I want to pass it on