

*Love Never Ends*  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13  
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Though not unexpected, the rift in the family had been difficult to put it mildly. With the support of her therapist, 30 year old Bonnie had confronted her father about his inappropriate behavior toward her when she was a child. Dad had angrily denied everything. Not surprisingly, Mom had come to Dad's defense telling Bonnie that she was crazy and living in a fantasy world. Still, that had been 15 years ago. After Mom died, Bonnie and her father had gradually renewed their relationship. Because she had healed in therapy, Bonnie no longer felt the need to bring up the painful past. Though she lived a few hours away, Bonnie visited her Dad regularly. He would come and see her, too. They also spent time together when she visited other family in his area. During one of those visits, Dad explained how his estate was to be passed on. Bonnie and her siblings would each get a share of the estate. Dad explained the things he had done to be sure that it was all fair.

When he died at a ripe old age, Bonnie and her brother and sister planned a meaningful funeral, greeted friends and family at Dad's wake, and stood side-by-side at the graveside. Bonnie cried. Though Dad had really harmed her, she felt that the relationship had been healed. She knew that despite it all, he really did love her. Yet, when the terms of Dad's will became known, Bonnie was left sad and perplexed. The estate was larger than any of them had imagined – about \$2.2 million. The will left only \$100k of that to Bonnie. Her siblings would split the rest. Bonnie was stunned that Dad had done that. She was uncertain what to make of it. She was very frustrated that Dad was not there so she could ask him. What happened next was too amazing for words.

Our text this morning is the very familiar and much loved 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Corinth was a Greek city about 50 miles southwest of Athens. As was true with other churches which Paul had founded, the church in Corinth had its share of turmoil after Paul had moved on. To put it bluntly, the church in Corinth was a mess. Paul had received word about all kinds of conflicts. Apparently, the rich members, who got off work earlier in the evening, were eating the communion meal before the poorer members could arrive. At that time, the sacrament entailed an actual meal, so poorer members were going hungry. Another problem revolved around Baptism. Some believers were bragging about who was baptized by whom as if being baptized by this person rather than that one conferred special status. This bragging was building up jealous rivalries in the community of faith. As if those things weren't enough, Paul also heard that some of the members were behaving in sexually immoral ways and even boasting over their sinful behavior. They were certainly taking their freedom in Christ a bit too far. In his letter, Paul also noted that some church members had decided to eat meat dedicated to pagan

idols, even when it caused great pain, conflict, and confusion for their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

After addressing such conflict and misbehavior directly, Paul first spoke to his flock about Spiritual gifts. The gifts of the Spirit are given for the common good. They are not just for certain individuals so that they can lord it over others. The gifts of the Spirit were not meant to create a hierarchy within the community. Rather, they are gifts the sum total of which is needed in order to build up the community of faith for the living out of God's mission in the world. Not all are called as apostles or teachers or preachers; not all have the gift of prophecy or healing, but all have the common gift – what Paul calls “a still more excellent way.” It is about this “still more excellent way” that Paul writes his poetic and familiar discourse on love, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and 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.” Notice that Paul has just named many of the gifts of the Spirit, which he spoke about earlier in the text: tongues, prophetic powers, knowledge, faith. Gifts of the Spirit are important, but without love, they are nothing – in fact, the one who possesses such gifts is nothing without love. That's pretty strong language. Then Paul goes into his lovely, lyrical description of love. “Love is patient, kind, not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude; love does not insist on its own way; is not irritable or resentful; does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. It is greater than either faith or hope, both of which will end in fulfillment. Why does love never end? God is love in its purest form. When all else comes to an end there will still be love.

With its beautiful, lyrical quality, it is no wonder that this text is heard most often at weddings. In such a scene, caught up in the ultimate celebration of romantic love, doe-eyed brides and love-sick grooms float over the words. So caught up are they with being ‘in love’ that all things seem possible. For the guests and wedding party, Paul's verses are something to sigh over in the haze of the romance of it all. If we really sit down with these verses, though, in the cold clear light of morning in our non-wedding, unadorned state, Paul's statement that ‘love is patient, kind, not envious, boastful, arrogant, selfish, irritable or resentful’ might seem more than a bit of a tall order.

Paul, though, was not writing about romantic love. In fact, Paul was not writing so much about individual one-on-one love as he was writing about behavior in the community of faith. His little flock in Corinth has been boastful, arrogant, selfish, impatient. That is not, he tells them, love. Without love – true love, we are nothing.

Bonnie was certainly more than a little shocked when she learned that her father had decided to slap her from the grave. The pain was great not so much because of the money – financially she would be ok – but because he had rejected her in a way that made it impossible to talk it over with him. She had not expected that. She felt helpless. There was no one to answer her question, “Why?” Then Bonnie got a call from his older brother Ray. Would she please come over, there was something he wanted to discuss. When Bonnie arrived, she noted that their sister Jeannette’s car was in the driveway. A little nervous and wondering what was coming, Bonnie was barely seated in the living room when Ray spoke. “Although we don’t fully understand why Dad wrote his will the way he did, I did what I could to make things right. Before Dad was too ill to participate, I wrote an addendum to his will stating that the estate was to be divided three ways – equally. I got Dad to sign it with my friend Leslie serving as a witness. I’m not sure whether the court will accept it. Jeannette and I have talked. If the addendum is not approved, we have agreed that we will find some other way to split the estate in thirds. It may take a few years to get that all sorted out, but we are committed to doing what is right by you. We love you.” Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. It isn’t always “me first.” Love takes pleasure in the flowering of truth. Love always looks for the best; it never looks back. It would have been easy for Ray and Jeanette to offer Bonnie only their apologies. Some siblings would have piously intoned the need to do “what Dad wanted,” which would certainly have been to their advantage. Instead, they loved their sister with open hearts and open hands. They were, in that action, being Jesus, for that is who Paul describes in this love chapter.

Think about all that the gospel stories tell us about Jesus for a moment and listen: patient, kind; not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude; does not insist on his own way; not resentful or irritable; does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things; believes all things; hopes all things; endures all things. Describes Jesus to a tea, doesn’t it? Without love we are nothing, but loving means being Jesus. But we are not Jesus. If we really listen to the text, if we move ourselves out of the romantic wedding fog of lovely poetry and consider what is being asked – patient, kind, not envious or irritable – if we really get down in all that well, who can really be loving?

I have a confession to make. On the level of lovely poetry, I love this text, but when I go deeper than that I really hate this text. No matter how I parse Paul’s words here I cannot seem to come out of it believing that I am any way nearly as loving as I am supposed to be. If only Paul had said, “sometimes” – sometimes kind, sometimes patient – then I might be ok. Or if he had said, “only occasionally” as in only occasionally envious or only occasionally irritable – well then I might make the cut, too. Paul, though, is a tough master. He uses no qualifiers. We don’t even get a choice – you know, love is having 5 out of the following characteristics – on most

days. I hate this text because I never seem able to live up to it. I also hate this text because as a preacher I'm supposed to have something edifying to tell you all about it – some way to assure you that we all can get there if we just look at it the right way. Although we may have someone among us who could breeze through this description – always loving, patient, kind, never envious or irritable, I'm betting that the only one in the room who fits that bill is not actually visible to any of us. Love equals being Jesus. Love equals our being Jesus. This love that Paul describes is Jesus. Love is who Jesus was and is because love is synonymous with who God is – God is love.

For the rest of us there is a current gap between who we are and who we are called to be. I often think when I read this text that it would be easier if I could take it piece by piece. On the one hand taking it piece-by-piece is problematic since love is the sum total – it is not sufficient to be kind this week and not irritable next week. We can't put not being arrogant off until later in the month because, well, we just have something to crow about right now. On the other hand, our very humanness means that we likely are not living the whole picture with much success – at least not regularly. When we think about becoming more loving; when we realize that love really is the heart of the matter, we cannot change unless we first get one thing straight. We love because we are loved first. This love that Paul describes is a perfect description of who Jesus/God is. We are, first and foremost, Sisters and Brothers, on the receiving end of love that is patient, kind, giving, unselfish – love that is not irritable, resentful, or rude; love that endures all things. Love flows from the heart of God to each one of us. It flows abundantly without ceasing, not because we deserve it; not because we have earned it; not because we are part of a select group. The love that flows from the heart of God flows because God is overflowing love – we human beings are God's beloved. God loves us so very much asking only that we love God in return. Love is reciprocal. It flows to us and pours back out of us. If we allow ourselves to be touched by God; if we accept the love that God offers as pure gift; we will so overflow with that love that it will pour out of us to touch all that we meet. We are only partially there for we humans have troubles trusting God; we have problems getting and staying close to God; sometimes – lots of times - we sin, which is the opposite of love. No matter what, no matter what we have done; no matter how unforgivable or irredeemable we think we are, God keeps right on pouring on the love calling us to let it fill us to overflowing. God keeps calling us to love each other as we are loved --- and how we are loved! Oh, the joy of it all for love never ends!