

SELFLESS LOVE

1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

February 3, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The sermon this morning is based on the epistle lesson. It comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, beginning at chapter 12, the last half of verse 31, and reading through chapter 13. It is on page 813 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From 1 Corinthians 12, beginning at verse 31b, we read in Jesus' name.

^{31b} And I will show you a still more excellent way.

^{13:1} If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² 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 have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Love. What is it? And have I loved my neighbor as myself? Have I loved my neighbor the way God has commanded me to love?

This might be the most guilt-inducing passage in the entire Bible. Maybe you've never thought of it that way, though. Maybe you've always seen it simply as a beautiful, and even poetic, tribute to love. And it is that. Paul extols the virtues of love. And he's obviously being at least mildly poetic in the way he writes this. Paul is trying to write a beautiful piece of literature, and he succeeds.

But, as beautiful as it is, this chapter also has the ability to induce tremendous guilt. And it's actually supposed to. One of the functions of the Law is to make us guilty before God. And this chapter certainly does that.

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So it's time for some self-reflection: "Love is patient and kind" (13:4). Am I patient? Am I kind? "Love does not envy or boast" (13:4). Do I envy? Do I boast? Have I ever wanted something that belongs to someone else? Or have I ever wanted other people to notice my accomplishments or my virtues? "[Love] is not arrogant or rude" (13:4-5). Am I arrogant? Am I rude? "[Love] does not insist on its own way" (13:5). Do I ever insist on my own way? Have you ever heard the phrases, "Lookin' out for number one," or, "You just have to do what's right for you"? Even if I recognize those slogans as selfish, do I still live by them? "[Love] is not irritable or resentful" (13:5). Am I ever irritable? You know, you're not you when you're hungry. Am I ever resentful? "[Love] does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth" (13:6). Do I ever rejoice at the wrong things? Do I ever smile when something bad happens to someone I don't like? How many people are cheering for the Rams, just because they want Tom Brady to lose? That's not love. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (13:7). Do I? When someone harms me, do I bear it? Do I give them the benefit of the doubt that they didn't intend any harm? And even if it's clear that they did intend harm, do I endure it?

Love is a beautiful thing, so Paul's description of love is appropriately beautiful, but after a little self-examination, we find that we are not love. If this passage does not invoke at least a little bit of guilt, we are either perfect—and I know most of you well enough to know that's not true—or our consciences have become calloused. A little bit of guilt can actually be a good thing, because it reveals to us our true nature, it informs us of our need for a Savior, and it reminds us that we must treat our neighbors with more love.

Love is a difficult thing. It is the highest of the virtues (13:13), and it is the fulfillment of God's entire Law (Rom. 13:8). If you can master the art of love, you will be a very good person.

But the concept of love has fallen on hard times. Maybe it's always been this way, but it seems to me there is no other word or concept in our society that has been more perverted than that of love.

What is love? If we could summarize the concept of love in one word, I think it would be this: "selflessness." Love considers another person's needs, and puts those needs ahead of one's own. Love sacrifices itself in the best interests of someone else. Love goes beyond treating other people as our equals, to treating other people as more important than ourselves. That is love. Love is selfless. But, in a stunning twist of irony, our culture often defines love as *selfishness*. This is equivalent to calling darkness "light" and evil "good."

And I want you to watch for this. Pay attention to it when you're watching TV or listening to the radio. I'm not going to tell you what you should or should not watch, but we do need to practice some discernment, because media has the power to change the way we think. What we fill our minds with inevitably affects the way our minds work. It's fascinating to watch the way Hollywood has catechized our culture through the screen.

When we think about what's right or wrong on TV, we tend to think in terms of sex, violence, and language. If it has a lot of those things, then it's bad, but if not, then it's wholesome and good. So the family friendly shows where no one gets shot, no one uses dirty language, and everyone keeps their clothes on, it's easy to assume those are okay.

But that approach is too simplistic, because there is a more covert way that the devil uses media to lead us into sin. When you have the chance to write an entire script, it's really easy to

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present whatever you want as good. And perhaps the worst way this happens is by substituting a *selfish* definition of love instead of a *selfless* definition. So pay attention to the way the word “love” is used. And I’m not doing this to pick on TV so that we can all feel holier than thou. That’s not the point. The point is to be careful so that the voices around us don’t shout out the biblical definition of love.

Sometimes the word is used rightly, usually when a parent tells a child that she loves her; therefore, the parent will always protect, always provide, and always place that child’s needs ahead of her own. This is true, and good, and beautiful. This is consistent with the kind of love the Bible teaches.

But when our TVs start talking about romantic love, it is almost always the opposite definition. That’s where it turns from a selfless and never-ending love to a selfish and temporary lust for pleasure, which is really no love at all. People start talking about a kind of love that makes them happy or fills an empty hole inside them. Love becomes nothing more than a stronger word for “like.”

This is really no different than the way you love a cheeseburger. If you say you love a cheeseburger, you mean that you get pleasure from the way it tastes and it fills an empty hole inside called your stomach. But what would it mean to love a cheeseburger according to the biblical definition? For starters, you wouldn’t be able to eat it anymore, because that always results in the destruction of the cheeseburger. Instead you would just put it in the fridge right away to prevent it from turning rotten for as long as you possibly can. Or maybe it means that you find some way to ungrind the beef and give it back to the cow. Maybe you pick the seeds out of the tomato and try to grow some offspring. You see how ridiculous that sounds? You can love a cheeseburger according to the world’s definition of love, because that involves consuming the burger for your own pleasure. But you can’t love a cheeseburger according to the biblical definition, because that would involve placing the cheeseburger’s best interests ahead of your own, and that’s certifiably insane.

Now, I have no problem with you saying that you love a big, greasy cheeseburger. There’s no harm in that. But there is incredible harm when we apply the selfish definition of love to other human beings. And this is almost always the way our TVs talk about romantic love. It means that we enjoy the other person, we like being around them, and we receive pleasure from them. And within the right relationship, there is nothing wrong with enjoying another person. The key is that certain forms of enjoyment must be within the right relationship.

But if that’s what it means to love another person, then love is nothing more than using that person for our own selfish pleasure. So TV love usually consists of two people using one another for their mutual pleasure. And then, when one of those people isn’t getting the same pleasure from it that they used to, they move on. And they actually talk as if their absence of love is the moral justification for why they must move on. They say, “I just don’t love you anymore, and it’s not right to be with someone I don’t love.” The biblical response is, *Well, then you should start loving that person again, because love is not a feeling that comes and goes. Love is a selfless and self-sacrificial action of putting another person’s interests ahead of your own. Do or do not; there is no feel.* Therefore, love does not come and go. Love stays. Love is, by definition, permanent. “Love never ends” (13:8). To say, “I will always love you,” means the exact same thing as simply saying, “I love you,” because you cannot love a person at one moment and then stop loving them. “Love never ends.”

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And I know I've preached about this before, but it's one of those things we forget if we're not reminded often, especially since the world's opposite definition of love is all around us. Unless we pay careful attention and practice some discernment, it's very easy for our definition of love to slide back toward the world's definition.

Remember this: Love is never selfish. Therefore, love is never about our feelings. It is always about the benefit to one's neighbor, whether that neighbor is your spouse, your child, your coworker, or the telemarketer who won't take your number off their list. This concept of love extends far beyond marriage. In fact, in this passage, Paul is talking about love within the Christian congregation.

The problem at the church in Corinth was that certain members were using their spiritual gifts, not to build up the congregation, and not to benefit the other members of the congregation, but to elevate themselves so that everyone would see how spiritual they are. They thought their particular gifts made them more important. Paul basically says, "So what? If you don't have love, it's useless." God does not give us gifts in order to serve ourselves. He gives us gifts to serve one another. This applies to all sorts of gifts, whether they are spiritual or mundane. The purpose is never to gain glory for ourselves, but to serve one another in the congregation. Are you really, really smart? Do you know more about the Bible than everyone else? That's great. But if you use that gift to make yourself look good, you are nothing. Are you the best singer in the congregation or the best fix-it guy? Great. Use it to serve. Use that gift to love your neighbor. That's why God gave it to you.

Love is the fulfillment of the entire Law. Love God above all things, and love your neighbor as yourself. This is the will of God for our lives.

And love is the manifestation of God's character. Whenever we talk about love, it's essential to remember that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). It is the defining characteristic of who he is. This means that the commandments of God—that we should love one another, as well as the specific ways he has told us to love one another—these are not arbitrary commands; they flow out of God's nature. God is love, so he loves us, and he commands us to love one another. God's very nature is love.

This is difficult for us to comprehend, because love is contrary to our nature. Our natures are selfish, so we desire to serve ourselves. And sometimes we project these desires onto God. We assume that he must crave power and glory and riches and comfort for himself. Without really thinking about it, we assume that God is selfish, just as we are, but he's not. God is satisfied, not by looking out for his own interests, but by looking out for ours. Our desires are selfish; God's desires are selfless.

God is satisfied in serving his creation. For God, Jesus' death on the cross is the most satisfying and joyful thing he's ever done, not because he thinks pain is fun, but because he is satisfied and he finds joy in giving himself for the sake of those who cannot help themselves.

The love of God, which we see demonstrated most clearly at the cross, is not some overwhelming emotional attachment to us. It's not like God looked at us and just liked us so much that he had to have us. That's not love. God's love is that he looked at us, he had great pity on us, and he sacrificed himself for us because we needed it. And this is the height of love: to sacrifice yourself for someone, not because they are worthy, but because they are unworthy.

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To our natural minds, God sacrificing himself for us seems kind of strange. But from God's perspective, this is the most natural thing he could possibly do, because God is love.

And this changes the way we approach the task of loving our neighbors. It changes the way we think about loving our spouses, our children, our neighbors, our coworkers, and one another in this congregation. As unworthy sinners who have already received God's love in Jesus Christ, we no longer worry about whether or not our love is enough to satisfy God's requirement. We know that God is already satisfied with us, because Jesus shed his blood for us. As long as we are worried about doing enough to please God, we can never even begin to love, because our actions will always be motivated by a selfish desire to get God off our backs or to gain something from him. But when we realize that God has already given everything to us in Jesus Christ, the only thing left to worry about is the needs of our neighbor.

God is love. And God loves you. This doesn't mean that he just likes you a whole bunch. It means that he gave himself into death for you. And even now, as he is risen from the dead, he lives to serve you, and to protect you, and to bring you from this world of suffering to himself in the new creation. This is what it means that God loves you. This love is unconditional. And now God calls us to love the way he has loved. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.