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The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

1 Corinthians 13

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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There is a reason that our reading this morning from 1 Corinthians is so popular at weddings. It is, after all, about love and its power to strengthen and move us.

Couples so deeply in love that that are pledging their lives to one another are attracted to the language of this passage, grace-filled and full of hope. This is how we want to love each other when we are married. We want all it, patience, kindness, endurance, rejoicing in our lives homes and families. It seems like the perfect recipe for beginning a new life together.

To interpret 1 Corinthians 13 as about love between two people is fine. After all, no matter how it is interpreted, it is about relationships. But this is a letter from Paul and it was written to a whole community in Corinth, not just two people. When we take a step back, it is revealed that 1 Corinthians 13 is wider and broader and deeper than two people and more extensive than any wedding. When we step back, we can see how this passage applies to all of us, our whole community, at every stage of our lives.

Don't worry! I'm not going to ruin your memories of your wedding or tell you that you made a bad choice, I just want to look a little harder at this passage. There is complexity here that gets missed when we confine it only to love between two.

My colleagues and I preach a lot about love. The reason for that is obvious. I think I can speak for all of us and most of the Episcopal church and much of Protestantism when I say we believe that love is at the heart of the Gospel, central to the message, part and parcel to our way of moving through the world.

But I get worried about preaching that message sometimes. I get worried because I'm afraid that you will either glaze over (here we go again!) or assume I'm talking about some kind of dewy-eyed, friendly-helpful love that requires us to never hurt anyone's feelings.

1 Corinthians 13 could take us there. That is dangerous territory. That is a love with no teeth. That is a love that, while nice, won't get anything done. That kind of love is reserved for Valentines' Day cards and inspirational posters. And it gets under my skin.

But let's look at the situation to which Paul is responding:

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is responding to a pastoral crisis in that nascent community. The people of the church in Corinth got the message that they are all supposed to have gifts before God, but now they are abusing those gifts, boasting about them, refusing to share them, looking down their noses at the gifts of their neighbors. They are hell-bent on seeking personal recognition and higher positions in their church. They are acting scornful and prideful.

We've read part of Paul's response to this crisis of behavior over the last couple of weeks: there are many kinds of gifts. The body needs hands, feet and eyes, we are individually useless without the whole body intact. We need all the gifts at the table, he reminds the community at Corinth. No one is more important than the others.

But then what does he say next?:

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. 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.

Actions matter, sure, but attitude matters more. If we are not offering our diverse gifts to God and community with love, says Paul we are nothing, our gifts are nothing. Love is paramount.

There's that love again. So what of it?

There was a time in my life when I really struggled with this next section about love. It is actually one of the reasons we DIDN'T read it at our wedding. Love, says Paul, is patient, kind and not envious, boastful, arrogant, rude or resentful. Going on this definition, I am the textbook opposite. I have never, ever, been called "patient" or "kind." And I have watched many of you, friends, struggle with some of these demons, too. We are all envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, resentful and a whole host of other unloving behaviors. How in the world is this achievable?

Is such a love humanly possible?

No. I think it isn't. Not in my experience, anyway. As an individual trait of character, love as Paul describes it is impossible. But we are not, nor have we ever been, called to thrive alone or to love in solitude. We are called into a community that ALL TOGETHER believes in a radical, death-defying, miraculous love, the kind of love that—though patient and kind—tears the curtain of the temple in two and reveals God's glory in the world.

It is this *community* that ALL TOGETHER is love embodied when we bring our gifts to the table proud of what God is offering through us, not prideful in our achievements, grateful for the resources God is making available for our use, not boastful about our success.

Paul is not calling us to choose love from a menu of spiritual gifts. Paul is not calling us to love when we are able or when we feel loving. Nor is he telling us that love happens in a vacuum. Paul is helping us to understand that we, as human beings created in the perfect image of a loving creator, will only be able to flourish to the extent that we can live into LOVE, specifically the love of God as it is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. AND we have to do all of this in the here and now, in this messy, confusing world of mixed messages. It is a tall order.

Through his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is reminding us that the love of God is always here, but it is up to us to choose to follow it, not our own wills; that we must boast of it, not our own achievements; that we must rely on it, not our own skills. To belong to God's church in Corinth, and indeed in the rest of the world, is to be an agent and willing recipient of God's love in the world, not seeking our own advantage, but working on behalf of the body.

Love is patient and kind, even when I am not. Love is not arrogant, boastful or rude, even when you are. Love abides here. We must choose to seek it, to follow it, to let it work through us and within us, the body of Christ, to create a better church, a better city, a better world.