

C Ordinary 4
2013 February 3
1 Corinthians 13.1-13
“Agape”

Pastor Bill was planning to perform a wedding at the close of the regular Sunday service. However, for the life of him, he couldn't remember the names of the bride and the groom. So he tried this: “Will those wanting to get married please come to the front?” Immediately; nine single ladies, three widows, four widowers, and six single men stepped up.

So here's the first thing you have to do when you read or hear 1 Corinthians chapter 13. Banish from your mind all thoughts of weddings or marriage. 1 Corinthians 13 is not a text about the love between a man and a woman. So regardless of how many times you have heard it read at a wedding, forget it: it's not about romantic love.

In fact, as educated as you are about the different words used for our English word “love” in biblical Greek, you can know immediately that Paul is not writing about romantic or erotic love. If he meant that he would have used the Greek word eros. But he doesn't. He used the word agape. And of course you know that the word agape has nothing whatsoever to do with feelings. It has to do with word and action. Agape is love that is demonstrated, regardless of feeling. In fact, real agape is evident when one of us can exhibit kindness and charity even when we don't especially like the recipient of our kindness and charity. Really. That's what agape looks like. One commentator says that agape is “the generic name for specific actions of patient and costly service to others.”

Now the second thing you really need to know is that Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is addressed to the church in Corinth. It is not addressed to the guild of tentmakers, or the clan of fishermen, or the society of stay-at-home moms. It is written to the church in Corinth, and the church in Corinth has some problems. If you want to get a good picture of all those problems, read the entire letter.

One of the Corinthians' most serious problems is that they are playing a game of one-upmanship. You see, the Corinthians were good Greeks, and the Greeks of that time in general prized learning and knowledge and skill and ability. So it was very common in general Greek society for men and women to compare themselves with one another.

And that's what is going on in Corinth. In particular, what the Greeks are spending a great deal of time doing is comparing what Paul calls “spiritual gifts.” Indeed, in the preceding chapter, chapter 12 of his letter, Paul spends no small amount of time cataloging those gifts. Things like the speaking of wisdom, the speaking of knowledge, faith, healing, miracle-working, prophecy, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, deeds of power, forms of assistance, forms of leadership.. Some are gifted to be apostles, some prophets, some teachers.

The problems is that the Corinthians are arguing over which of these gifts is the greatest, and in particular it seems they have lifted up speaking in tongues, that is, speaking in a spiritual language, to be the greatest. No, Paul says. Rather, think of yourselves as parts of a human body. The body does not function without all of its members, and all of its members have different functions. So it is, Paul says, with the body of Christ. Every member of the body, with its specific function, is needed for the health of the whole body.

So implicitly the message is: Stop arguing over who has the greatest gifts, or which gifts are the greatest. All of you are needed, and all of your various wonderful, Spirit-given gifts are needed.

Then he says: I will show you a still more excellent way. Immediately he launches into his discourse on agape, which is NOT another gift, but is a way. Agape is a way of using one's gifts in the service of others, for the good of the body, that is the body of Christ, which is the church. The Corinthian church, and this church, and Trinity Lutheran and the True Life Center and Sonlife Church and Red Hills Baptist and every other church in our town and state and nation and world. Indeed, the body of Christ is all of the churches in all of the world, together, for we are all one body, one church, in Christ Jesus.

Paul starts off by saying that if he speaks in tongues of mortals and angels, but does not have agape, he is just making noise. If he can prophesy and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and has great faith, but doesn't have agape, he is nothing. And if he gives away all that he owns and hands over his body so that he can boast, but doesn't have agape, he is nothing. (Other Greek texts refer to him handing over his body to be burned: it's the same idea.

Regardless of what amazing gifts any one of us may have, chosen from the long list in chapter 13, or any others, if we cannot demonstrate self-sacrificial love for our brothers and sisters in this church...we are nothing. Regardless of how gifted, talented, and successful one of us may be at whatever task, if he cannot demonstrate agape even for those he may not like much...he is nothing. At the bottom of things, it's not what we can do that counts. It's whether or not we can set aside our own pride and serve someone else, share a kind word with someone else, withhold a harsh word for someone else, check our anger, that really matter.

Love is patient and kind, Paul writes. And here is what it is NOT: It is not envious. It is not boastful. It is not arrogant or proud or puffed up. It does not behave shamefully. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. It takes no joy in injustice.

People who have studied the first Corinthian letter have drawn a direct line between each of these expressions in verses 4 through 7, and some behavior that Paul has already condemned among the Corinthians. In chapter 3, verse 3, Paul says that they have demonstrated envy and quarreling. In chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5, Paul says the Corinthians are guilty of boasting. And so on. For every one of these eight descriptions of what agape is NOT. You can sort of imagine the Corinthians sinking lower and lower into their seats as Paul's letter is read to them.

Look! Paul says. Agape is not puffed up. But that's exactly what you are! Look! Paul says. Agape does not behave shamefully, but that's exactly what you are doing! And so on.

Paul invites us to examine ourselves. When do we, in our dealings with sisters and brothers who are a part of this church, demonstrate any of these behaviors that are actually anti-agape? When do we respond to an injury with the attempt to get even? When do minor matters take precedence over caring for the feelings of others? When do we fail to think before we speak? When are we insensitive to the feelings of others?

Paul fully recognizes that there are times when we must "speak the truth in love" but boy, we had better not forget the agape.

Paul closes chapter 13 by reminding us that all spiritual gifts, all talents and abilities will one day pass away, but that agape will never die. Right now we know and prophecy only imperfectly, but one day the imperfect will end. Right now we are children, but one day we will grown up. Right now we can see only dimly, as in a mirror, but one day we will see clearly. Then all of

these gifts will no longer be necessary. What day is that? Why the day that Jesus returns, of course. But, Paul says, even beyond that day, the rule will still and always be: demonstrate agape.

He finishes this way: And now, faith, hope, and love, abide, these three. And the greatest of these is love. The greatest of these is agape.