

## The Life of Love

Today's reading from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth is so familiar – used in weddings all the time – who here had it at their wedding?

However what Paul was speaking into and really getting at is way beyond what the average wedding couple is thinking about so I'd like to try and get that across to you this morning. Even at our last Wardens meeting someone said in passing something like, 'Well, how do we love? I hope that this provides at least some of the answer to that question for us all.

I'm going to start by describing a bit of the context of chapter 13 and lay out what Paul was really saying here. Then I'll look at some of the ways that contrasts to the way our world thinks about love and what all that means for us as St Matthew's.

This chapter is very well known especially verses 4-7. Even though they are usually heard out of context they seem very meaningful, but so much of the meaning Paul was trying to get across is lost by not reading it in the context of the argument so far and the fact that this is part of a letter Paul wrote to a specific group of people with specific circumstances that he was speaking into. Paul's letter to the Corinthian Christians was written in response to at least one letter of theirs which apparently asked questions about various aspects of Christian life including the spiritual gifts and how they were to be used when the community gathered in worship. He is in particular trying to counter the idea that they had already made it spiritually, that some were so spiritually mature that they were already in heaven, so to speak. He was also writing to a divided church where some considered themselves 'spiritual' compared with others, particularly because they had particular spiritual gifts. And he was writing in response to some disturbing accounts he had of their conduct in worship, things like not sharing food at the meal around their communion, and arguing over what they ate, specifically eating meat offered to idols. Basically Paul was writing to a church that was having a really difficult time staying together.

In the chapter before and after he is specifically speaking about spiritual gifts – in Chapter 12 he explains how all the grace gifts are needed in the one body and the community needs to be united in its diversity of giftings. In chapter 14 he speaks of striving for the gifts that most build up the body and using them in an ordered way for the benefit of all, both in the church and for those being witnessed to.

In 1Corinthians chapter 13 Paul has three main things to say: the 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph is about the necessity of love, the next is a definition of love in this context, and the last paragraph is about the permanence and superiority of love over other spiritual things. It actually begins with the last verse of the chapter before which I asked Don to add to the reading. 'And I will show you a still more excellent way'. Paul is giving the context for all Christian spiritual life. The 'way' refers in the New Testament times to the whole way of life involved in following Jesus. The love that Paul talks about here is an overarching, all-embracing style of life, not something that can just be considered as another spiritual matter alongside the spiritual gifts he has been talking about. The word translated 'more excellent' actually has the sense of 'beyond measuring'. Speaking to a community who were measuring themselves against each other – a common human behavior – he was presenting this as something beyond their scale of measurement.

To the first paragraph then – verses 1-3. Some of the Corinthian Christians regarded speaking in tongues (ie. other unknown human languages or the languages of heaven) as primary evidence of being spiritual, of having arrived in that final spiritual state. So Paul comes in personal – though he is speaking about them he uses his own behavior as the example. He writes that if he, as a tongue speaker, does not have love it is not the tongues but he, himself, who is just a noisy sound. In fact a gong in particular was an instrument of

pagan worship so he may have been pointing back at their pagan roots. If they don't have love they are just noisy pagans. He then lists other spiritual giftings and exaggerates them – if I understand ALL mysteries and ALL knowledge, if I have ALL faith so as to move mountains – and don't have love then I am nothing. It is not the giftings themselves that are nothing but the person becomes nothing. This is particularly aimed at those who regarded themselves as spiritually superior because of their obvious spiritual giftings. But what he says next is relevant to the other group within the church as well. If I give sacrificially, give everything for charity, that's quite clearly an exaggeration of something good to do. If I hand over my body so that I may boast – this seems to refer to what Paul clearly says elsewhere he boasts about – his sufferings in his body for the sake of their salvation, his being beaten, going hungry and such like. Even these actions which those who aren't into spiritual giftings would think of as showing a person to be a really keen Christian – doing even these seemingly loving deeds without having love as a way of life gains someone nothing. What Paul is stressing here is that nothing we do can prove that we are spiritually superior or even spiritual at all if we don't have a life of love. He doesn't say that any of these things in themselves are not good – in fact in other places he commends them. It is not a matter of these things OR love, or even these things motivated by love, but these things by a person whose whole way of life is characterized by love. Otherwise that person's life adds up to zero before God. Love gives meaning and appropriate flavor to all other Christian living.

To apply this to today Paul might say “We can't prove our spirituality by how much Bible we can quote, by how much theology we know, by our correct or proper doctrine, by the style of worship service we have, the amount of praying or singing in tongues we might do, by the number of converts we lead to the Lord, by our programmes for social justice, by how much we give or how much we serve our local community. If love doesn't characterize our lives we are not spiritual Christians at all.

And note – Paul has sometimes been thought of as harsh and unloving in the things he has written. But he couldn't have used himself as the example here if he hadn't been a clear example of love to them.

So what does it mean to 'have love'? To begin with it is clear that love is not a feeling, not at all. All the words used to describe love in verses 4-7 are verbs not adjectives – you can't really see that in the English translations. A better though more awkward way of translating this might be:

Love is to be patient, love is to be kind. It is not to be envious or to brag or to act arrogantly or behave rudely. Love does not insist on its own way, it is not being irritable or resenting others, etc. These are what love does, not abstract or theoretical descriptions. Love is collection of intentional actions. It is practical. It is not sentimental but is behavioural. Paul goes on to explain the character of this love he is talking about and he does so particularly with reference to the Corinthian Christians.

Love is being patient and kind – the passive and active responses to others. Being patient – not just waiting well or enduring suffering but enduring injuries without retaliation and never giving up. Being kind – active goodness on another's behalf.

Then 5 characteristics of Corinthian behaviour that show they were not loving. Envy that one group had of the others grace giftings, boasting practiced by those with the giftings, pride or arrogance that they had in their giftings (tongues, or knowledge, or service), the word translated rude – which means behaving improperly towards others or shamefully as eg those who did not share food at the Lord's table as mentioned in 1Cor 11. Self-seeking, insisting on its own way as the Corinthians demonstrated in their arguments over food offered to idols.

And the Corinthians needed to realize that love is not irritable or easily angered, and keeps no record of wrongs. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing or evil, gossiping about what is not right about others, but rejoices in the truth, in what is right. Love is the opposite of the behaviours that divide a community.

Paul sums up his description of love with a magnificent description of self sacrificial love which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back but keeps going to the end – Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in the Message.

In the last part of his discussion of Love as the more excellent way Paul points to the permanence of love compared to the temporary and partial grace giftings. What is permanent must dictate how what is only here for the present period functions. Paul emphasises again that the giftings are not in themselves evidence of being spiritual and are certainly not evidence that heaven is already here on earth. Rather they are only partial and for the present and like a child puts away childish things when they become an adult, or a mirror reflection is a poor substitute for seeing the real person (especially in their sorts of polished metal mirrors), these grace giftings will no longer be needed when heaven is fully a reality, when we will know God fully as he already knows us, and don't need the Spirit to reveal the things of God to us, for example. We won't need the grace of healing when all are made whole in the presence of God; we won't need great faith to know God's power, etc. Spiritual gifts, good as they are, are only for serving others and building up the body in the present age. They will pass away as this present age passes away. Christian love, which the Corinthians were lacking in, is the more excellent way as it continues into eternity. Faith, hope and love are the present ongoing reality of Christian life Paul uses elsewhere too. However faith will one day become sight, hope will end in fulfillment, but love will remain the way of life into eternity.

Can we grasp how fundamentally different the Biblical idea of love is from that of the world around us? Does the way the world talks about love all the time make it difficult for us to put into practice the love that Paul exhorts us to do?

The love Paul describes is clearly Christlike, the love God has for us and what we are called to do. God's love for us is not motivated by our loveliness. It is his nature. It comes out of his being, self-originating. In our world we tend to love because the person before us has something we find loveable, or because we have compassion for them or in some other way our feelings are aroused. God calls us to his sort of love – not dependant on who we are loving. None of the actions described by Paul here are dependant on the person we are loving. In the world at the time he wrote, dominated by the Roman/Greek mindset, such self sacrificial love was not regarded as rational and not valued as a virtue at all. All good works and philanthropy could be practised by pagans but the Godly character of the love Paul described is something Christians are enabled to live by the Spirit so having this love is the only distinguishing characteristic of the spiritual Christian. The same applies just as much today. The world does not regard these sorts of self-sacrificial actions as being essential for success, self-fulfilment and happiness.

So how does our surrounding worldly culture affect how we love and think about love. An example of this can be seen in the approach to marriage and how love functions there. The Western ideal of romantic love, of feelings aroused and expressed between a man and woman leading to commitment and marriage is not held everywhere. Many in our international congregation in Eindhoven came from cultures where marriages were arranged by parents and families and the man and woman learnt how to love one another practically in order for the relationship to work well. This sort of love is about deciding to do what is good for a person. For Christians in these cultures the Biblical teaching is much easier to understand - these are the actions one needs to do in a real Christian marriage as well as towards other Christian brothers and sisters. Naturally positive feelings follow but they are not the driving force.

However in Western culture in particular feelings are regarded as very important. People are encouraged to do what they feel like doing unless it will hurt someone. If you do something good that you don't feel like doing it is regarded as less authentically good. Being authentic and having integrity in Western culture usually means that your feelings must line up with your actions and attitudes. Intentions are put above the results of actions (contrast that with Jesus' story of the two sons, Mt 21:28-31). In this world if we don't feel loving then our actions for the sake of another are not regarded as loving in the same way as if we did feel loving. If the person whom we show patience or kindness towards does not feel good about it then it is not regarded as loving in the same way as if they felt the action to be loving. Being loving in today's world is supposed to take the feelings of the person we are loving into account, even if what they want or feel like is not what is best for them. All of these approaches are not Biblical at all.

Paul never says that the love he describes feels good. Because of the worldly ideas about what love actually is we can even act as though the mission of the church is to gather like-minded and likeable people together. Then perhaps in that sort of community it would be easy for us to love – or rather 'feel the love'. But true love is not measured by how good it makes us feel. In the context of what Paul says here it would be better to say that the measure of love is how well it allows for difference and disagreement without there being division.

This love is a lifestyle of intentional actions, not the good feeling the world describes as love. This Christ-like love is the sort of love that is needed to create, sustain and build Christian unity. It is the sort of love that is essential for all Christian living, for being a Christian community and for its shared worship. It can seem like this life of love is a noble but far off ideal. But Paul does not present love like this at all. This sort of life of love is within reach of each one of us because it is the life of Jesus, the life inspired by the Spirit, the life we inherit as members of Christ's body. We love because God first loved us. And Paul's purpose in describing this life of love is that it will bring the unity in the church that Jesus prayed for before his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, that we be one so that the world may believe.

One last thought I had about these actions, this life of love. It requires us to live in such a self-giving way that we may fear the consequences for ourselves. We may feel vulnerable in the face of those who do not live this life of love, who seek, like the members of the Corinthian church, to measure themselves and their spirituality as superior to us. But as we live the life of love we live the way of life of the future Kingdom which is breaking into the present.

I finish with a quote from Professor Tom Wright – one of the greatest Biblical scholars and teachers of today - Love is God's river, flowing on into the future, across the border into the country where there is no pride, no jostling for position, no contention among God's people. We are invited to step into that river here and now, and let it take us where it's going. (Wright, Tom. *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians (New Testament for Everyone)* (p. 177). SPCK. Kindle Edition.)