

Healing Division
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
February 2, 2019 – Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Last week, we examined the twelfth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and the way in which Paul embraces diversity – the body has many parts, but all the of the parts are important; and they are all part of the one body. And you may remember, we concluded last week with the last verse of that twelfth chapter: "Strive for the greater gifts, and I will show you a still more excellent way." So today, we consider that "more excellent way"; and, of course, that way is *agape* love.

You've heard me say several times that *agape* is my favorite Greek word. (My favorite Hebrew word is *Shalom*, but I'll reserve that for another sermon.) But *Agape*. . . I love that fact that our church newsletter is entitled *Agape* and I love its subtitle: "Greek for love without limits."

The Greeks have several words that are usually translated as "love." First there is *Eros* from which we get the word "erotic." *Eros* is a sensual, sexual form of love. Then there is *Phlios* from which we get the word "philanthropy." *Phlios* is a brotherly love. Then there is *Agape*. I hate the fact that some Bibles translate *agape* as "charity." Charity falls so short of the true meaning of *agape*. Yes *agape* love is charitable love; but it is so much more. It truly is love without limits. Love of all people. Love for all of God's creation. Love that would cause one to lay down one's life for a neighbor or even a stranger.

When 1 Corinthians 13 appeared as in the lectionary for today, I jumped at the chance to highlight it. So often this scripture is relegated to wedding ceremonies. It was read at my wedding; and I suspect it was read at many of yours. And I think that is very appropriate. When I counsel wedding couples, I comment that a truly healthy marriage is build on all three forms of love: *Eros*, *Phlios*, and *Agape*. But it's also important that we don't limit *agape* to only the love for a spouse.

So let us briefly look at what Paul is saying about *agape* love. He starts by saying that it doesn't matter what we say or what we do, if we don't have love, if we don't say it our do it out of love, it's worthless. Then he goes on to describe what real love looks like. Love is patient. Love is kind. It's not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It doesn't insist on its own way. It's not irritable or resentful. It doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

Then Paul says that *Agape* love never ends. To that I want to shout "Amen." I shout this on two levels. First and foremost, we know that the love of God will never end. God is a loving God. Indeed, God is the source of all love. In his First

Letter, John actually defines God as love. Indeed God's love is eternal just as God is eternal. Often times, I tell people at a funeral that the love that the deceased has shared with those present will never die; and I believe that to the bottom of my soul. Each of us is, in part who we are, because of the people who have loved us, and shared with us, and cared for us. And each of us, because of the love we have experienced, share that same love with others, and those others will share that same love with others, and on and on and on. Indeed, the love we share will never die. It is eternal. Love never ends.

Friends, we live in a troubled world. We all witness much injustice, hurt, pain, and countless other ways life can be unfair. And sadly, all too often, the response to these things, or the defense from these things, is fear. Fear is not always a bad thing. It's good for a young child to be afraid of harmful things. It may even be good for a young child to be afraid of aggressive strangers. Fear can help us preserve a sense of safety. However, fear can also drive a wedge between ourselves and others. So often, we simply fear that which is different. So often, I consider racism or sexism or homophobia or some other "ism," and I ask, "What are we afraid of?" It seems we simply fear that which is different. So I again recall Paul's metaphor of the body. Should the "arm" fear the "leg"? Or should the "eyes" fear the "nose"?

Friends, *agape* love is the antidote, the healing force, that conquers fear. It is in love that we recognize that all of God's creation is good. Indeed, love allows us to close the gap between ourselves and those whom we deem as different. It's only in love that we can truly embrace diversity.

John tells us that God is love; and Jesus is the personification of that love – love in human form. Jesus exemplified that love in the greatest way possible through his passion and death on the cross. And Jesus makes that love real for us today through his resurrection and his perpetual presence in our lives. Jesus is walking with us, guiding us in the path of love.

I've mentioned a couple times, John's First Letter. Let me conclude by reading a portion of that writing:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loves us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loves us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is perfected in us. . . God is love, and

those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (1 John 4:7-12,16b)

Paul concludes: “Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” Friends we are called. We are called by God. We are called to experience the love of God; and, we are called to share that love with every person we meet. Amen.

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