

February 3, 2019, "Love Is", Rev. Thandiwe Dale-Ferguson

1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in tongues of human beings and of angels but I don't have love, I'm a clanging gong or a clashing cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and I know all the mysteries and everything else, and if I have such complete faith that I can move mountains but I don't have love, I'm nothing. If I give away everything that I have and hand over my own body to feel good about what I've done but I don't have love, I receive no benefit whatsoever.

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things.

Love never fails. As for prophecies, they will be brought to an end. As for tongues, they will stop. As for knowledge, it will be brought to an end. We know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, what is partial will be brought to an end.

When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, reason like a child, think like a child. But now that I have become an adult, I've put an end to childish things. Now we see a reflection in a mirror; then we will see face-to-face. Now I know partially, but then I will know completely in the same way that I have been completely known.

Now faith, hope, and love remain—these three things—and the greatest of these is love.

Will you pray with me?

Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Darkness closes in over this particular street. The streetlights, moon and stars dim ominously as though someone has thrown a dark veil over them, or so the story goes. A young mother stands over her son's crib, her back turned to the baby within. A darkly cloaked figure looms over the woman, commanding her to get out of the way.

"You don't have to die," the sinister voice tells her. "It's not you I want, but him." The figure gestures over the woman's shoulder to the baby behind her. "Get out of my way, and I won't hurt you."

"No," the woman begs, weeping. "Not the baby. Take me. Do whatever you want with me, but not my child!" The woman shields the infant with her body, covering the little head and shoulders with her arms. Then there comes a sudden flash of green light, and the woman crumples. The dark figure steps closer, laughing softly to himself at the woman's foolishness. There is another flash of bright green light, but something odd happens, for it is the darkly cloaked figure who falls, not the baby. The baby is left unscathed apart from....

Anyone know?

YES! A lightning bolt scar across his forehead. I am indeed talking about Harry Potter. I read them all as a teenager, and I am re-reading them by way of audiobooks -- I'm about halfway through the last one. With Corinthians 13 on my mind, I can't help but hear Harry Potter's beloved headmaster Albus Dumbledore telling his young student, "Harry, you will always have something that the evil sorcerer Voldemort does not have. You have LOVE. Voldemort underestimated the power of love, the power of your mother's love to save you."

How often we, perhaps like the annoyed adolescent Harry, think of love as an emotion -- that fluttery feeling we get when our beloved walks into the room, or the safety and security we felt as children in a trusted adult's arms, affection for our best friend (human or four-legged), or the feeling of delight we get as we watch the next generation.

A college professor and mentor of mine, Jerry Irish, invites us to think of love differently: "read within the context of [Paul's letter to the Corinthians], this love is a state of being. It constitutes the fundamental relationship to God without which I am nothing.... The love Paul has in mind in today's text is the reality of God's presence in our lives and the very basis of our

humanity. For Paul, our capacity to flourish as human beings is realized to the extent that we can live in the love of God revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ.”

This love is powerful stuff. There is nothing sentimental about it. It does not ebb or flow like our affection or feelings of good will towards each other. The love that Paul describes is active, tough, resilient and long-suffering. It gives our lives meaning and substance -- without it, we have neither power nor purpose. Indeed, Paul tells us, without this love, we are nothing.

The trouble comes when we read Paul’s description of love and think that it is somehow attainable for us as human beings: Love is patient, love is kind, it isn’t jealous, it doesn’t brag, it isn’t arrogant or rude, it doesn’t seek its own advantage, it isn’t irritable, it doesn’t keep a record of complaints, it isn’t happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

Now I am not saying that we should not strive to love in the way Paul describes -- we should. Heaven only knows that the world could use more patience and kindness, more trust, hope and endurance, and less jealousy, irritability and resentment. The world could certainly use people who rejoice in truth and justice. Yes, certainly, strive for this kind of love.

But let us not be fooled into thinking that we can somehow attain it on our own. However hard we try, we will undoubtedly find ourselves falling short of the standard Paul describes. No doubt, we all have more moments than we would like to admit of impatience and unkindness, jealousy and arrogance, or of seeking our own advantage. Many of us have stored up at least a few resentments against someone.

That being said, when we look at Paul’s description of love and think that it is something we are supposed to attain on our own, we set ourselves up for disappointment and failure. And, I believe, we misunderstand Paul’s message. See, I think Paul, in writing to the divided, conflict-ridden Corinthian community, is calling them to return to God.

You’ll recall the verse from 1 John 4:8 “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” Paul’s description of love is a description of **the God who is love**. And I believe that Paul is trying to tell the divided, arguing folks in Corinth that without God’s love, they can do and be nothing. But WITH God, WITH God’s love, they will find meaning, purpose and indeed power permeating their lives. They will find patience, kindness, love of truth and justice, trust and hope increasing in their own lives.

For the church in Corinth, where divisions, cliques, and power struggles have taken hold, this message of love and Paul's accompanying call to humility is good news! And it is good news for us also. See, all the spiritual gifts in which the Corinthians have been putting so much weight and power -- wisdom, prophesy, speaking in tongues, knowledge -- it will all end.

But not love -- love will last forever. It is the benchmark by which we are to live, the lens through which we are to read and interpret scripture, the motivating factor for all that we do. And God's love is here, revealed to us through Christ's life -- a life in which he welcomed the stranger, foreigner and outcast, a life in which he healed the sick and shared food with the hungry, a life in which he made time to rest and be alone with God, a life which he lived and gave for others. This love has the power to change our lives and transform our world.

Just as it did through Candice Payne in Chicago this last week. Ms Payne — an ordinary, middle-class, hard-working woman, impulsively pulled out her credit card and paid for 20 hotel rooms for complete strangers. She had heard how dangerous the cold in Chicago was going to be, and she was worried about folks living out on the streets. So she paid for hotel rooms for them. An ordinary woman – like you or me. Not Oprah not the mayor, not any of Chicago's rich or famous athletes or comedians, entertainers or actors, but just some average woman, much like us. Friends, that's what love looks like. And the irony about love is that the more you give it away, the more you love extravagantly, wastefully even, the more love there is.

Later this morning, we are invited to the table where all are welcome to participate in this radically welcoming, wastefully giving love, where we receive that love anew so that we, like Christ, can share it with the world. Amen.