

Sermon Draft

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:31b–13:13

Sermon: “Christ’s Love”

“The greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13).

It’s not just preachers who are always looking for illustrations of love. Every poet, author, playwright, and rock group from Shakespeare to the Beatles to Nicholas Sparks takes their shot at picturing love. Lots are foolishly superficial; some are movingly sacrificial. We also each have our own experiences or at least our own dreams of what love is or is supposed to be. Paul’s “Love Chapter” is one of the best.

But try these on for illustrations of love. See how they stack up against millennia of attempts.

Jesus touches a man with leprosy and restores him to his family and his place in the community.

Jesus gives sight to a man who’s never seen his world. Jesus raises a young man from death and gives him back to his widowed mother.

Jesus tells another young man, a rich one, exactly the hard truth he needs to hear.

Jesus calls to a man up in a tree who's long been an outcast from polite society and then goes to be a guest in his home.

Jesus forgives a woman who everyone knows has sinned much. Jesus weeps when he sees the sadness death brings.

Jesus promises paradise to a criminal dying an agonizing death.

Jesus takes everyone's death upon himself so that we will live forever.

How are these for illustrations of love?

Just picture it: The bride and the groom standing there at the altar, holding hands, looking into each other's eyes. They are so young and eager for the future. Then the pastor reads, "Love is patient, love is kind . . ." It's such a familiar scene, isn't it? Perhaps today's Epistle from 1 Corinthians was even read at your own wedding. If so, you may have thought at the time that these words were specifically intended for married couples. You probably hoped that you would always have such a perfect love as Paul described. However, if you have been married for some time or know people who have been married for a while, you surely know that such perfect love is incredibly difficult to maintain.

Marriage, however, wasn't exactly what Paul was talking about when he wrote this text. The truth is this text was really intended for perhaps the most dysfunctional and loveless congregation in the New Testament: the Corinthian congregation. They were a congregation full of sexual immorality, division, lawsuits. Their division was made most clear at the table, where they could not even eat with one another. Not even the Lord's Supper. They truly were a congregation that had forgotten what it meant to be loved by Christ and to love others. But this must not be the case for us. For Paul in our text has shown us a more excellent way: Christ's cross is the source and norm of Christian love and life.

Now it's true that Paul's words set a high standard and I would dare to say a standard that none of us keeps. Would any here boast he or she has perfect love? Would any here say you've never let your anger get the best of you or held a grudge? Would any here say you never lose your patience? Would any suggest that you've never spoken a lie to a loved one? Would any here say you're completely selfless and not self-seeking? No, to say such things would be nothing but nonsense and lies. We all have fallen short.

The truth is that there is but one who keeps such love: Christ. And when we compare our love to his, we find that Christ's cross shows us how sinful, self-centered, and imperfect our love truly is.

Indeed, it was on that cross where he, who is love incarnate, bore all things and endured all things. It was he who did not insist on his own way, and it was he who refused to resent those who sinned against him so greatly, but prayed, ***"Father, forgive them."*** It was he who had suffered long while disobedient and sinful people failed him again and again. It was he who now on the cross chose to suffer for those very same people that they might be forgiven of their sins. It was he who was without sin but full of love. And, indeed, we can never measure up to such love. We are ever only but a poor reflection of Christ, if not a distortion.

Yet that is all the better, for Christ came to love a loveless people that they may lovely be, to paraphrase one of our hymns (LSB 430:1). He did not love us because we were lovely but rather because he is the God who is merciful. And this is seen no better than on the cross. For Christ's cross does not only reveal our sinful love but much more his forgiving, perfect love.

After all, did not Christ say, ***“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends”*** (John 15:13)? And is this not what he did? He laid down his life for his friends, indeed for you and for me. And in doing so, he, the Son of God Incarnate, showed once and for all that ***“God is love”*** (1 John 4:16). He showed his love by allowing his blood to be poured out as a sacrifice for all mankind, even those who hated him. He was crucified that we might be forgiven. Indeed, ***“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”*** (Romans 5:8).

Brothers and sisters, Christ does not love his Church because we are spotless and clean or without sin; he loves us so that he might make us perfect, without any spot or blemish, that we might be holy and blameless. And we must never forget this, for it is both the beginning and end of our love.

The Corinthians were more concerned with external appearances than with this forgiveness. Some boasted of their gifts, others of their tongues, and others of their knowledge; yet all these things will pass away. Indeed, every external gift you have in this life will pass away. But love will not.

Because the love God has for us and for our brothers and sisters in Christ will always endure, even into eternity. Indeed, in the words of the Gradual, great is God's steadfast love toward us and his faithfulness endures forever (Psalm 117:2).

Therefore, we must hold this cross of Christ before our eyes, both to know that we are forgiven and loved as well as to know how to love. For it is Christ's cross that reveals the shape of perfect Christian love. Let us remember what Christ said: ***"Take up [your] cross and follow me"*** (Matthew 16:24).

Now when Christ said this, he did not mean for us to atone for the sins of others. That duty was Christ's alone. No, what Christ meant is to bear his love both in Word and deed in all we say and do, even to the point of death, even to the point of the cross, even as he showed his love for each of us. Indeed, was this not Christ's command, that we love one another even as he has loved us (John 13:34)? This is the very same love Paul describes in our text.

In this sense, this passage really does speak of the love between spouses, because it speaks of the love that all Christians ought to have for one another and for those outside the Church.

It is the love given and shown to us that we might live it out in our daily vocations. It is a love which forgives, even as it has been forgiven by Christ. It is a love that endures forever, for we will be with him forever, even as he is risen from the grave to eternal life. Indeed, our faith and hope will pass away and will finally become sight. But the love we show now is greater, because it causes us to look beyond ourselves to our neighbors, and the relationships that we form now with one another as Christians will last into eternity.

This love is a love which does not seek itself but seeks the benefit of others. It is a love that is without fear because those who have this love know they have already died with Christ in Baptism and will be raised with him on the Last Day. It is a cruciform love which has been formed by Christ's cross and so forgives others. It is the love of Christ, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us in Baptism. It is Christ's love, and it is our love.

May God grant that we always keep this love for God and for one another.
Amen.