

Rev. Dan Welch Epiphany 4 1-30-22 Text- 1 Corinthians 12: 31b-13:13

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." (13:13). To his Christian friends in Corinth, St. Paul sends his famous "love talk." I wonder how many couples here chose Paul's words for their wedding day. I wonder how many people have treasured these words about love.

Speaking of love, there's a humorous story that's told about the young man who went off to college. At every break, he would bring home a different girlfriend. His father was amused. But every time, his mother would say something. "Son, she's beautiful. But isn't she maybe a little too gloomy?" Or with the next, Mom would eventually wonder out loud, "I don't know. She's so particular." And then with another, "She sure strikes me as too mousy for you, dear."

At last, the young man brought home a young woman who was *most* impressive. She was very outgoing, smart, and even a little sassy! He had this sneaking suspicion. "No wonder I'm so in love, she's just like Mom!" And his mother? What a hit. Mom was thrilled with this girl.

But, wouldn't you know it? His father took the young man aside. "Son, I've always kept my opinion to myself. As long as you're happy, I'll love this girl. But I can't put my finger on it: there's just something about her I don't like!"

Love can certainly be a tricky thing to figure out. And as much as I try, I admit I still have more to learn about the subject. Does the same go for you? Who here wants to be more lovable? Who here works at being more loving?

"And I will show you a still more excellent way," Paul promises at the beginning of our text this morning (12:31b). So yes, today, as the sermon title teases, St. Paul will teach us: "How to Be a Better Lover"

"I would better love the people in my life, if only . . ." What? What would it take? I wonder if Paul gives us his own list, his "if only." "***If*** I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ***If*** I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and ***if*** I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ***If*** I give all I possess to

the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." (1 Cor. 13: 1-3)

Ever the missionary, Paul was always hurrying to touch hearts in another culture, to share Jesus' love with new people. "If only, like my mother tongue, I could speak all their languages, speak like an angel. If only I could preach with prophetic power, grasping and giving away all the amazing wonders of God's Word. If only I could move the mountains, with faith jump the furthest sea. If only I were more willing to give all I've got. To give myself to give my life just like my loving Lord, like Jesus did!"

First Question: What more do you *need* to be a better lover?

If only. If only. But if I "have not love," I'm just making noise. I'm a bell clanging in an idol's temple, silly, foolish. Without love, "I am nothing" (13:2). Without love, "I gain nothing" (13:3) Paul writes.

What about you? Are you without love or are you with love? The good news is this: You have *been* loved. Unconditionally, undeservedly, you are loved by God! God has poured out His heart on you. You are filled to the brim and then running over with love from God.

Imagine that Paul's list of "if onlys" has come true in you. Imagine that God has given you the ability to speak every language, to speak of love like the angels. Imagine that God gives you the powers of prophets, the wisdom of seers, and the faith of mountain-movers. And imagine that all that God's given to you, you give. You pour out your very life, all in the cause of God's love.

And then, would God love you just a little bit more? Or just as you are today, is God holding anything back?

Did God love Paul because of what Paul did for God? No! God loved Paul from the very beginning, before Paul did anything. Remember before his journey to Damascus, Paul hated Jesus. He was on his own personal vendetta to wipe out Christ's people. And that's when God's love shone down on Paul.

Why does God love you? Because of **you**? God loves you because of Himself! "Just as I am, without one plea But, that Thy blood was shed for me" (LSB 570:1)! Purely, perfectly, finally, and forever, God loves you! He's baptized you. He's made you His because of Jesus. So, the answer to

the first question: "What more do you need to be a better lover?" Nothing!  
Only Jesus!

Speaking of Jesus did you hear about the guy who played the part of our Lord in the Passion play his church was putting on? Shouldering that heavy cross, stumbling up the church's long driveway, he felt so honored. When his friends from church played their parts, some moaning and others jeering his "Jesus," the actor was near tears.

Then he heard the voice of his neighbor, one with whom he had "issues". This neighbor joined the jeers, tossing out silly lines. "You think you're so great, 'Jesus.' Too busy to mow your lawn?" The jibes went on and on, even turning personal, nasty. "Your house looks ugly. Almost as ugly as your daughter!"

Well, at that point, "Jesus" had had enough. Throwing down the cross, he stomped over to that neighbor. Hot words, I can't repeat. The Passion play came to an abrupt halt. Everybody tried to smooth things out.

Afterwards, the director told the "Jesus" actor, "Tomorrow night, we'll have to let your stand-in play the Lord." The poor man was so

embarrassed, but he desperately wanted to continue with his part, so he begged, "Please, I can do this."

Sure enough, the next night, his neighbor came back for round 2. He was just as angry and just as mean! You could see the guy who played "Jesus," red-faced, struggling under that cross. But the neighbor kept dishing it out. "And don't get me started on your mom!"

His teeth clenched, "Jesus" cocked his head and fixed his stare on his tormentor. "I'll deal with you after the resurrection!"

Is that our Jesus? All *our* nastiness hits His heart. Yet He carries our sin clear to the grave. His heart filled only with love, He rises, lives, and loves us still today!

Second Question: From where can you get more, better love?

Paul's words describe love so beautifully. Does he describe you? In your mind, try to repeat Paul's sermon, but substitute your name for the word love in vv 4-7, like this: *Are you patient? Are you kind? Do you not envy, do you not boast, are you not proud are you not rude, self-seeking, easily-angered?. Do you keep no record of wrongs. Do you not delight in evil, but*

*rejoice with the truth? Do you always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere?* Do Paul's words describe you? Does Paul's portrait of love really depict **anyone**?

**Jesus** is patient. Has he ever said, "I forgave you before, but not anymore"? Jesus is kind. He's always nudging us, "Are you stuck? I'll help!" Jesus does not envy. He could say, "Only I am lovely. Why should you get any?" Jesus doesn't boast. That's a ridiculous picture! As if Jesus is at the throne, bragging, "Father, look at me! I am perfect! I am love!" In truth, Jesus is at the throne pleading, "Father, see these wounds You gave Me for them. Forgive them, guard them, guide them!"

Jesus is not arrogant or rude, does not insist on His own way. Gladly giving Himself into the hands of His God, He begs, "Father, not what I want. Your will be done!"

Jesus is not irritable or resentful. He does not rejoice at wrongdoing. Do sin and death do wrong against you? Does the devil wrong you? The devil is delighted to do you wrong! Everything that's wrong with you, and

everything wrong does to you, this kills Jesus! Gentle as a lamb, He takes up the cross.

Jesus rejoices with the truth. His Easter joy, the resurrection triumph, He truly loves you!

Jesus "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (v 7). All that His Father promises, Jesus pours out his pure Pentecost Spirit to make it all come true for you. Jesus "never ends" (v 8).

Second Answer: From where can you get more, better love? Nowhere else but Jesus!

God has given us each different abilities. You have your unique experiences and your own dreams. And so, we each make our unique contribution. Isn't that why God has brought us together in this church family? He loves for us to love one another. We can love with such a love that it spills over to those in our lives who do not yet know Jesus. Because we know where love comes from. Jesus loves us! You've got God's word on it. "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." (v 13).

Faith holds on to Jesus, takes to heart His love. Hope looks forward to all Jesus so lovingly gives us. So why is love the greatest? Because only love is what God's heart is all about. In his First Letter, John says it simply and he says it best: "God *is* love." "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God" (1 John 4:8, 7). Amen