

## EPIPHANY FOUR, YEAR C, JANUARY 30, 2022

A young girl texted a picture of herself to her boyfriend and in the text she said: "I love you with all my heart. I love you more and more each day. I will love you forever and ever. I am yours for all eternity." And then, as only teenagers could do, there was a P.S that said: "If we should ever break up, delete this picture." How fleeting love can be.

Today's passage from 1 Corinthians is probably the favorite or at least in the 'Top 10 scripture passages of many Christians. It is a beautiful chapter and inspiring, painting a picture of love that we all desire, strive for, hope for in our own lives and relationships. We love love. We write about it, sing about it, dream about it, have plays and films about it. Think of these popular songs titles: "Addicted to Love", "Endless Love", "All for Love", "All my Loving", "I Will Always Love You", "Best of My Love", "Bye, Bye Love", "Can't Hurry Love", "Stop in the Name of Love." The list goes on and on. This scripture passage is also the one chapter that is most often read at weddings, probably many of you had it read at yours. We love this chapter about love as we all desire love.

However, the love that Paul talks about is not a sentimental love or a love that is motivated by feeling. The love Paul writes about is not a romantic emotion. Rather, the love he describes is a verb. It's not something you wait around for or fall into. It is all about action and movement. Love acts patiently and kindly. Love acts against the impulses of envy, irritation, and arrogance. Love yields, love rejoices, love refrains, love endures. In other words, love doesn't stand around waiting for warm fuzzies; love gets up and gets moving.

However, to put this chapter into context and to really understand this passage you need to read the first 12 chapters of his letter which gives you some insight into what was going on in the church at Corinth. The church had split into factions with people pitting their favorite religious teachers against each other and about who was baptized by whom. Some were vying for power and prominence based on who had the "better" baptism. Congregants were taking each other to court. Folks who spoke in tongues believed they were superior to those who didn't. Others were fighting over everything from food to circumcision to celibacy to head coverings. The Eucharist had devolved into drunkenness and gluttony, and the poor in the church were going hungry. In other words, all hell had broken loose in this church. So called spiritual and self-righteous one upmanship had obliterated the love that never ends.

Paul believed if the church was going to make a difference in the world, they had to start with themselves. They had to be a model of God's love, embodying peace and hope in a world of chaos and despair. But before we think that the Corinthian church's failings were unique, you have to look at the big picture. Paul basically said, it's not simply that love must outweigh the obvious "bad" things in our lives like greed, envy, lust, and hatred. It also has to outweigh the "good" things. If all the wonderful gifts you have and things you do, even faith, is divorced from love then they are worthless.

Think about that for a moment. Do we actually believe love exceeds the good things we do? Not in theory, but in practice? Do we really value love more than we value being right or wielding power, amassing wealth, acquiring knowledge, or doing "good?"

This love Paul described in this chapter is not just a verb it's a very practical verb. When Paul lists the things, love is and isn't he is giving us a roadmap. They are do-able steps he gives us; these are intentional, practical choices to effect positive results in the

lives of others around us. Love builds up; but it does so through the choices we make for what we say and how we act, with others foremost in mind - not just daily, but countless times each day! It is a love that has the well being of others as its main concern. It is a love that remains when everything else is gone. It is a choice we make as individual members of the family of God. It is saying to ourselves, "Today I will be loving. Today, I choose to make the needs of another my concern. Today I will refrain from attempting to put myself above others. Today I will love." This is the love we are to ascribe to.

Paul was able to write about love with such authority only because he knew firsthand what it could do. When he looked at the trainwreck of the Corinthian church, he was able to remain hopeful because he knew what God's love did to his own stony, self-righteous heart. It was God's love that had transformed Paul from a persecutor to an advocate for all Christ is.

Paul's message is also a message to the Church today. We can't make excuses. The world we live in does not always love but that doesn't mean we can hold our love back or give our love only when it is convenient. It is not a conditional love that Paul speaks about. It is a love that is unconditional. The world may not live by love or ascribe to the dynamics of love that are outlined in this "love" chapter. We, however, are given the challenge to be persons who love.

Most of the time this seems impossible. How can I care about everyone I encounter? How can I love someone I don't know or don't care about or even like? Besides, it's emotionally and physically draining. To love as Paul asks us to love seems overwhelming. Does he really expect us to give and give and give, all the love we can?

The only way we can begin to love this way is because it is God who bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. It is Jesus who is patient and kind. Jesus who doesn't envy, boast, or rejoice in wrongdoing. Jesus whose love will never end. If this were not true, there would have been no hope for the Corinthian church two thousand years ago, and there would be no hope for us now.

The only hope we have is the hope Paul clung to; the hope that Christ will love us into loving. That he will be love, in us, around us, through us, and for us. That in his generous, self-giving, love, we will find that source of life and love in us so we'll be able to give the love of God away, left and right.

After Bishop Curry preached at the royal wedding a few years ago in which he invoked the word love some sixty times, he was asked, "Does this love thing really work?" His response was, "It's the only thing that really works."

When we begin to take this love thing seriously, taking up the challenge to choose to love on a daily, intentional, practical basis, is to be truly and gradually transformed. Perhaps a better way to have a clearer understanding of how we are to live our lives filled with love is to read how Eugene Peterson put the eloquent words of St. Paul into more contemporary language. He puts it this way, "Love doesn't strut. Doesn't have a swelled head. Doesn't force itself on others. Isn't always, "Me first." Doesn't fly off the handle. Doesn't keep score of the sins of others. Doesn't revel when others grovel. Puts up with anything. Trusts God always. Always looks for the best. Never looks back but keeps going to the end."

That's the kind of love Christ has for us. Those are our marching orders. This is how we are to live our life as a Christian. The best advice taken from St. Paul is: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, and love extravagantly. These three things will bring

you close to the heart of God. But I think it is most profoundly put by our former bishop Mark Beckwith with his blessing. May God give you the grace to never sell yourself short; grace to risk something big for something good; grace to remember that the world is too dangerous now for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love. Amen.