

***“What Is Love?”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**August 27, 2017**

**First Scripture Reading: 1<sup>st</sup> John 4:7-12, 19-21**

<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

<sup>19</sup>We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup>Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup>The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

**Introduction**

Love is at the center of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught that the greatest of all the laws is to love God and to love your neighbor. Jesus taught that even though we have heard that we should love our neighbors and hate our enemies, that in actuality we are supposed to love our enemies too and pray for those who persecute us. He taught that we are to love one another as he first loved us.

And even though we know these lessons and have probably heard these passages before, love can be confusing, confounding, frustrating and complicated. How do you love people you don’t like? How can you love your enemies when they persist in doing things to harm you? Well, if you’ve been a regular attendee here and if you’ve been following along, you’ll know that we’ve talked about this before. But it seems like with the way things are these days, it would be a good idea to talk about it again.

So today we’re going to define what it means to love as Jesus instructs us by unpacking Paul’s famous “love chapter.”

**Second Scripture Reading: 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup>Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought

like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

### **Sermon: “What Is Love?”**

One of my favorite movies ever is *The Princess Bride*.<sup>1</sup> If you haven’t seen it, it’s a love story about a young woman named Buttercup and Westley, the farm boy who serves her family. Whenever Buttercup makes demands on poor Westley, no matter how harsh or frivolous it is, he always replies “As you wish.” Until one day, Buttercup realizes that whenever Westley says “As you wish,” what he really means is, “I love you.” What a great bit of movie magic! Add to that, it has pirates, sword play, rodents of unusual size, heroes, giants... and, well, they just don’t make ‘em like that anymore.

*The Princess Bride* taught us that there is no more noble cause than true love. And that notion is widely reflected in our popular culture and always has been. Think about all of the great love songs of the modern era: Elvis Presley’s *Love Me Tender*, Nat King Cole’s *Unforgettable*, Frank Sinatra’s *The Way You Look Tonight*, and Dolly Parton’s *I Will Always Love you*, a song made most famous by Whitney Houston. Most of the greatest songs ever written were love songs. And I’m pretty sure the first song ever composed was some caveman banging two rocks together to try to impress the cave woman next door.

From *Romeo and Juliet* to Sam and Diane<sup>2</sup> to Jim and Pam,<sup>3</sup> great love stories permeate and define our cultural experiences. Even some reality TV shows like *The Bachelor*<sup>4</sup> are intended to create a love story for a nationwide audience. The Beatles once sang “All you need is love” and we have taken that sentiment to heart.

But, that means when we think about love, we tend to think about an emotion; a feeling. We think about the people that we really like; the ones that make us feel good when we are around them; the ones we enjoy spending our time with. And when we use the word “Love” it’s often in reference to our favorite places and things. You probably hear people say things all the time like “I love tacos” or “I just love that dress on you.” At the late service a couple of weeks ago we sang the old hymn “I love to tell the story.” But is this sense of affection for other people or the affinity we have for our favorite things really what’s at the center of the gospel? No. To love as Christ loves involves something more.

Our ideas of love are colored by our own experiences of it. When we think about love we often think about how it feels to *be loved*. We think about our parents and grandparents when we were children. We think about our wedding days and the feelings we had the first time we heard our own children call us mama or daddy. The word “love” is almost always connected to feelings of romance and affection and satisfaction. But if we think of love in those terms, then loving *most* people in the world becomes just about impossible. If love is what we feel, how can we feel something for people we don’t even know? Or for people who do things or who stand for causes, with which we profoundly disagree?

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<sup>1</sup> *The Princess Bride*. Dir. Rob Reiner. Perf. Carey Elwes, Mandy Patinkin, Robin Wright. Act III Communications/Twentieth Century Fox, 1987. DVD.

<sup>2</sup> *Cheers* (Television Series, NBC, 1982-1993)

<sup>3</sup> *The Office* (Television Series, NBC, 2005-2013)

<sup>4</sup> Television Series, ABC, 2002-Current

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 is probably pretty familiar to most people who have ever been to a wedding. I would venture to say that it's the most popular wedding scripture ever. My college roommate wrote a poem based on 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 for his then fiancé, now wife. He read it to her at their wedding. I remember it included passages like "Anne is patient and Kind... she's never boastful and always tells the truth..." it reflected a common understanding of this text as being about romantic love.

But Paul wasn't interested in romantic love when he wrote this. In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, Paul teaches the Corinthian Christians about what it means to be the church. He talks to them about the ways they have been divisive. We talked about his understanding of Christian unity last week when we read from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12. But then in this chapter, Paul begins to teach the Corinthians a more excellent way... something better than the divisiveness that has characterized their lives together up until that point.

You see, the great irony of this as a wedding scripture is that it often gets read because people see it as recognition of what they already are. But Paul wasn't congratulating the Corinthians for what they were already doing. He was chastising them for the ways in which they were not loving one another. Paul doesn't talk about feelings. He defines love here entirely in terms of what we do and what we should *not* do.

He starts by pointing out that love is patient and kind, characteristics that he attributes to God in his other writings.<sup>5</sup> If we are seeking an answer to the question "What is love?" then we begin with letting patience and kindness characterize our interactions with one another. Which can be difficult when we are angry or hungry or as is often the case, a combination of both known colloquially as: "hangry." It can also be challenging to be patient and kind when it seems like the person with whom you are dealing is being decidedly *impatient* and *unkind*.

But Paul continues: "Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

Now Paul doesn't just pull these concepts out of thin air. These are all things for which he has chastised the Corinthian Christians elsewhere in this letter. So what he is saying here is essentially "remember all of those things you've *been* doing, well that's the opposite of what love is. If you're going to love God and one another, then look at yourselves, and do the *exact opposite*."

These things Paul says that love *is not* are not unusual, and they would not be listed among the great crimes of the world; to envy, to boast, to be arrogant, to be rude. We're probably all guilty of these things, at least in small doses, from time to time. Who has not looked across the fence and envied your neighbor's garden or bragged a little bit about an accomplishment over which you are particularly proud. And who hasn't gotten a little arrogant in a discussion when you know what you're saying is right and the person you're talking to is wrong and who hasn't snapped off a rude reply in traffic or even in a hastily written and not well thought-out e-mail?

Again, these are not *criminal* offences. But they *are* the kinds of things that affect our ability to be in close relationship with God and one another. And at its heart, that's what love is: being in relationship with God and one another in a way that reflects the true nature of God and that builds up God's Kingdom.

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<sup>5</sup> See Romans 2:4, NRSV

Now this definition of love is not hard to abide when we are talking about people we already like. But the world is full of, and we spend much of our daily lives in close proximity to, and doing business with, people we don't really know. We don't really like them or dislike them; they're just... *there*.

A while back we lost our telephone service at the house. We called our provider and scheduled a service call. On the appointed day and time, I took time off from work and waited for the technician to arrive "between noon and four." When he never came, I called customer service from my cell phone to find out why and to reschedule.

The customer service representative didn't recognize the number I was calling from so she wanted to verify that I was the homeowner before she would discuss the case with me. Since Mary had made the appointment, I didn't have the password she had set up to verify that I was who I said I was. So, the Service Representative said she would call the phone number associated with the account and if I answered, then she could complete the verification.

Except that the phone number associated with the account was out... which was why we had scheduled a service call... which was why I was calling her from my cell phone. Predictably, she called the number and got no answer. Now I wish I could report to you that our conversation that day was completely characterized by patience and kindness. But to my shame, it was not. And I learned something very important.

I learned that it is in those situations that are frustrating, when we are dealing with strangers or when we have no emotional ties to the people with whom we are dealing, when there is no risk of shame from being seen or found out by people who know us; it is precisely in those situations that patience and kindness and not being arrogant or rude and all of the things Paul mentions here are *most* important.

"Love" as Paul describes it here in this passage, is easy when there is no conflict. It is easy when there is already mutual trust; when the parties who are interacting know each other, have a history together, and are wanting to see the best in each other's motives. In other words, when we're trying to love people we already know and like.

But it's just when those factors are absent and love is so difficult that we need to be loving the most. And what Paul is saying here is that we don't have to muster warm fuzzy feelings for every person we meet. That is impossible. But we do have to love them.

We interact with hundreds of people every day. Most of them are relative if not complete strangers. And when we interact with them, we make value judgments about how much effort we will put into being loving towards them: The barista that serves you your morning cup, the man behind the counter at the post office, the person behind you in line at the grocery store. All of these may be total strangers that you will never see again. There may be no direct benefit to you if you are loving towards them or not. But your love shown to a stranger is another building block that will contribute to the building of the Kingdom of God. And love done to a stranger will plant the seeds of more love until it fills the world.

One of my favorite stories about Mary, is about the day she met Republican Senator Lindsay Graham. I've told it before but I want to share it again because I think it is instructive for us, especially in our current political climate. During our ten years in Clemson, we were invited several times to attend a football game in the University President's box. It was always fun because the food was a step above regular stadium

fare and you just can't get better seats. But there were often movers and shakers from around the state in attendance, too.

One game, Mary and I walked out to our seats in the box and found that we were seated next to Senator Graham. Now I don't think it's any secret how Mary and I tend to vote. But in that situation, when Mary could have ignored him, changed seats, or been hostile to him as is so often the case in our modern American political environment, Mary chose to strike up a conversation with him for no other reason than that he was the person God had set next to her that day.

Mary didn't particularly know Mr. Graham beyond what she had seen on the news and she didn't particularly care for his politics, but he is a child of God, and Mary was not going to fail to be loving to one of those.

You see, God is love. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we see most perfectly revealed the true nature of God. In Christ's love and compassion we see God's love and compassion. When we see Jesus give of Himself to love and serve others, we see what God is like. When we experience the grace and mercy of Christ, we experience what God is like. And because God loves us... all of us... like a parent, God calls us to love each other like brothers and sisters, even if we don't know each other, or agree with each other, or even like each other very much.

That's what love is.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.