

Fully Known

A Morning Message for Worship on Communion Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
February 7, 2016
Text: 1 Corinthians 13

The text we read together this morning from 1 Corinthians, the 13th chapter, is probably one of the most familiar texts of the Bible. These beautiful words are so familiar, in fact, that some folks don't even know they come from the Bible. If asked they might suggest they came from Shakespeare's pen or perhaps one of the other great English poets. This is because folks who don't know or really understand Christianity can't imagine that something so universal as Paul's description of love could possibly be in the Bible. As we talked about briefly last week, folks on the edges of the church, on the edges of the Christian faith and especially those standing completely outside of it, often do not see Christianity as a positive, life affirming framework for living life. They only react to the negatives they've come to associate with it – pontifications on sin and redemption through the blood of an innocent man who died a horrible death and the smug self-righteousness too often a part of those who feel they have been "saved" when others so clearly have not. This lack of understanding is the reality which our church, any Christian church, faces and it is to this reality these beautiful words of Paul speak so eloquently.

Of course, the reason this text is so familiar is because it is so often read at weddings and funerals. And why wouldn't it be. Its lilted description of love captures so well the kind of love couples making marriages vows believe they are affirming in each other. So too the inclusion of this text at funerals makes sense since this is the kind of love we want to celebrate in the loved one now lost to us even as we entrust that person to God's eternal care in the midst of our love for them and their love for us. Love never ends. How extraordinarily powerful those three one syllable words are. How much comfort and strength they hold for enduring the challenge of marriage and the loss of a loved one. No wonder these words reach out from the sacred pages of the Bible and beyond the doors of the church to inspire and comfort.

The thing is, though, beautiful as they are, these words are so much more than a lyrical description of love – what it is and what it isn't. We usually miss this reality, though, because we are used to reading this text standing on its own. We literally pull it out of its context from the larger letter Paul was writing to the church in Corinth and act as though it was intended as merely a free-standing essay on love. But that's not what it was. That's not what it is. In reality, it is a continuation of the point Paul was making at the end of the chapter just preceding it. As you might recall from the last week's sermon or even the week before that, Paul was writing to the church in Corinth to offer them guidance

and assistance in sorting through an internal power struggle in that community which had arisen when folks decided that certain talents and abilities individuals had – specifically speaking in tongues – was more important than others. Paul wanted them to understand that the strength of the church comes from the variety of individual gifts of the members blended together to carry God’s mission and message to everyone. In particular, he wanted them to see that glossolalia or speaking in tongues – the talent some in Corinth were arguing was more valuable than anything else because it was thought to be the language of heaven – was no more important than other gifts from God. What mattered most was the combination of all the gifts of the Spirit as he called them for the good of the entire community. If they could understand this, he told them, then he could and would show them a still more excellent way.

Enter the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, the “love chapter” as it is often called. This chapter and the description of love it contains IS the still more excellent way Paul just described at the end of chapter 12. That’s the critical piece of information we lose entirely when we just pluck this chapter out of its context to read it at a wedding or funeral. We lose entirely Paul’s intention to explain to the folks in Corinth, as well as to us still today, that God’s love and the framework it provides for living life is always the still more excellent way of living together as members of a

family, as members of a faith community and as citizens of the world. This love is all that matters, Paul is saying. And he explains why. To understand his explanation in this very familiar text, we need to look at it in more detail.

For example, the reference to glossolalia is clear in the very first sentence of Chapter 13. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels” is describing ordinary human speech – tongues of mortals – juxtaposed with tongues of angels or the language of heaven, glossolalia. If you have the ability for any kind of speech, heavenly or otherwise, Paul says, it’s not as important as the love which always undergirds that speech. That ability is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. All that speech is just jarring noise devoid of harmony and worth that means nothing if love does not form its foundation, if love is not the message it conveys.

Then Paul continues on giving examples of the other kinds of gifts people have lifted up as so important to the church – prophesy, knowledge and understanding, faith, a willingness to give away everything one has even to the point of one’s own life – even these gifts, these sacrifices don’t mean anything if they don’t arise from love in the first place. In other words, Paul is saying that the motives behind the use of all these gifts in the community matters more than the gift itself. Are you standing up to give your thoughts on the future or to impart the wisdom you feel you alone possess because the love of God for the people is speaking through

you? Or, are you using those gifts to make yourself feel more important, more special, more indispensable? Why are you doing what you are doing, Paul is asking. Is it for yourself or is it in response to God's love which knows no end? Is it an actual expression of God's love for the community being channeled through you? Or, is it something else centered on and in you and you alone. *Why* are you doing what you are doing, Paul invites them, and us, to ponder. Because until you know your own reasons, you'll never be able to grasp God's. You'll never be able to know what the love of God that knows no ends, no boundaries, truly is. And if you don't know it, you can never be transformed by it. If you don't allow yourself to be fully known and loved by God, if you do not put the effort into knowing God and how God's love is acting *through you* for the good of the community, you can never be fully known as the person God created you to be.

In this beautiful text we think we know so well, Paul is emphasizing that love – God's love – is truly imperishable in a way nothing else is. The other gifts God gives to people – prophecies or predictions for the future; tongues, mortal or otherwise; knowledge about specific things or life in general; even a willingness to make extraordinary sacrifices – none of these is imperishable. All of them will end. All of them can go away in an instant, Paul says. But not love. And this is really difficult for us to understand, he reminds us. It's like looking at yourself in a

cloudy mirror. You get an idea of what you look like but not the full image. That remains obscured. Love is exactly like that, Paul says, because we can only truly see it when it is reflected through our own actions and the actions of others. And we are imperfect human beings, beloved of God to be sure but still imperfect. So, we can never really see love completely, never really know it completely, except through God and how God's love is reflected through the lives and the actions of others in the faith community. We are fully known to God, to each other and even to ourselves only through God's unending, imperishable love alive in others.

In the final analysis, what Paul is saying to us in these beautiful words written more than two millennia ago is quite simple and quite extraordinary. Paul is saying that love is the framework for everything in life. It must be because love is the one gift of God to us that is unconditional and imperishable. Other gifts like faith and hope, they're important for sure. They are vital, in fact, to the life and wellbeing of the individual and the community of faith made up of those individuals. Faith, hope and love abide – continue on into the future, Paul says. But the greatest of these is love. Why? Because only love will survive for all eternity. Faith and hope for Paul are directly connected to the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. This is, Paul says, what we have faith will happen at some point in the future, in God's own time, in God's own way. This is also our hope that God's will

for God's people – a world where justice is an everyday occurrence, where everyone has enough to eat and drink and a place to live – this realm of our all-powerful God will ultimately come to be in the fullness of God's time. When that happens – and it will happen Paul is sure -- we won't need hope anymore because we will have this incredible new reality – God's reality. But love – God's love for us and our love for God – that love will survive even the *end of time* because it is that powerful, it is that essential, it is that great a gift of God's reality in our lives. Love in which we are fully known by our God as beloved beyond all understanding, that love survives it all, Paul tells us, even the coming of God's kingdom on earth. Now that is extraordinary.

So, as you head back out into your week with Valentine frenzy ramping up as it does this time of year, I hope you will remember Paul every time you see a heart in candy or card form. I hope you will think about Paul's description of love as the greatest gift we ever have received or ever will receive. I hope you will appreciate just a little bit that God's gift to you of being fully known and fully loved by God has no end. I hope every "Happy Valentine's Day" wish you offer and every one you receive reminds you that the love we offer each other in our imperfect human way is the palest reflection of the love God has for each one of us. And that love never, ever ends. Because it can't. Thanks be to our Amazing God. Amen.