

LABOR OF LOVE

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. 2 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. 3 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. 4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 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. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 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. 12 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. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

(I Corinthians 13, NRSV)

This is Labor Day weekend, and that can only mean one thing at our church—we just completed an exhilarating and exhausting week of Vacation Bible School. Hats off to Rev. Chase Peeples and Christian Education Chair, Terry MacGown, for a fabulous week. A big thank you to all of the teachers, adult and youth assistants, Chris Miller for leading recreation, April Lindevald for helping me lead music, and especially Judy Young for the wonderful crafts, and then to Don and Judy together for the fabulous decorations.

For Judy and Don, Vacation Bible School is a labor of love. Judy starts planning the crafts and decorations in early spring and works on them up until the big week. In fact one week ago, Judy and Don arrived for worship at 8:30 a.m., and then stayed all day and into the night putting up circus wagons, flags, and this year's crowning glory, the circus big top complete with wooden finials and red and white striped poles. When they finally left, shortly after midnight, I told them this was the first year that they waited to finish the decorations until the actual day of the event! And this year all of their planning, cutting, nailing, painting, and taping was done in the midst of spending time with their very first grandchild.

Volunteering for this enormous project every year is not their job; it's not a tax write off; and it certainly infringes on their free time. However, it is a labor of love, love for the challenge of it all, love for the beauty of the finished product, but mostly love for the children and the delighted looks on their faces as they enjoy each year's creation.

Most people have a labor of love, if not more than one. Some of us are lucky enough to be employed in a labor of love. On our recent vacation down South I got to visit my college alma mater and visit my former band director, Dr. Kent Sills. Seeing him and his wife reminded me about his labor of love—students and music. For many years Dr. Sills was the Director of Bands at Mississippi State University, a position that allowed him to share his love of music with thousands of students. It also put him in the position to act as a caring father figure for countless students who needed his love and guidance during their formative college years.

Not everyone gets to be employed at a labor of love. Oftentimes, it's the result of the job, and not the job itself that makes our work a labor of love. When I was in preschool, my dad worked as a high school teacher and coach, threw a paper route early in the morning and worked on his master's degree in the evening. He did this so that my sister, Susan, and I could have opportunities he never had. That was a labor of love. We all know people who get up at 5 a.m. to catch an early train, work on Wall Street under tremendous stress and pressure, and arrive back home late because they want the best for their families. That's a labor of love. When we'd rather stay at home and relax instead of serving on a board, leading a Scout troop, coaching a team, or singing in the choir, but we do it anyway, that's a labor of love. Raising kids is a lifelong labor of love.

There is another aspect of this labor of love business, and that is learning to love wherever we labor. No matter how we spend our days, we all meet people who need to be loved. As Christians, we have a calling to make our lives a labor of love for God. Today's scripture lesson from I Corinthians 13 offers us many insights into the nature of love. You probably connect this familiar passage with weddings. I read it at almost every wedding I perform. You probably had it in yours. But the Apostle Paul actually wrote this passage to a very unromantic crowd. He wrote it to a church in the midst of conflict.

We tend to romanticize the early church, but the Corinthian church had major problems. It was split into three factions, each of which exalted one Christian leader over another. Some followed Paul, others Apollos, and still others Cephas. Each group clung to its own interpretation of the Gospel from ultra conservative to ultra liberal. And they argued over everything from theology to food.

Some thought anything went, including supporting a man who was guilty of incest. Others were ascetics who rejected marriage completely. Some were against women speaking in worship while others supported a fuller role for women. Some would eat meat that had been previously offered to a pagan idol while others wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot fork. Some believed that their physical bodies would quite literally come back to life, while others thought resurrection only dealt with a person's spirit and soul. Finally, they were divided over something I imagine none of us have ever given much thought: the spiritual gift of ecstatic speech. Some thought that ecstatic speech, or the gift of tongues, inspired by the Spirit, was the only sure sign that a person was a Christian. Others thought it was just one gift among many (*The Interpreter's Bible, Vol.*

X, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953, pp. 7-8). It was this debate on tongues that inspired Paul to write what we know as the great love chapter in the Bible, I Corinthians 13.

In this chapter, Paul aims to elevate the necessity and supremacy of love in all things, both temporal and spiritual. He does so by listing everything that doesn't impress God. Paul says that love is more important than the most eloquent and educated speech. Whether it's a sermon delivered from the pulpit or a conversation around the dinner table, if it lacks love Paul says it's just a bunch of noise. Let me pause at this point and add that as a drummer I take umbrage at Paul's equating cymbals with noise, but that is another sermon for another day.

Next Paul then takes on the gift of prophecy, which doesn't mean predicting the future, but rather the gift of great spiritual insight. He says that insight and knowledge will some day end, but love goes on forever. He states that if we have great faith that can produce wondrous works, it means nothing if it's not done out of love. Even giving away all of our worldly goods, if not done out of love, is meaningless. Finally he argues that even dying a martyr's death has no meaning if it isn't done out of love.

After hearing this list, it may seem like nothing is good enough. If great faith, giving up everything we own, and dying a martyr's death are just noise, what's the point of mere mortals even giving it a shot? But the point of Paul's list is not to discourage us, or say that nothing we do has virtue. His point is that whatever we do, no matter how great or how small, we must do it with love.

How can we make our lives a labor of love? Paul offers us some advice in words that are at once poetic and practical. "Love is patient; love is kind; 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. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends" (I Corinthians 13:4-8a, NRSV). While these words were written for the troubled Corinthian church, they remain just as meaningful to us and our labor of love today.

Paul's insightful passage does not define love per se, but instead tells us characteristics of love. It is as if "love is a rope composed of many different strands" (Ibid. p. 172). The first strand in love's rope is patience. Those battling factions within the Corinthian church were anything but patient with one another. Wherever two or more gather, we are sure to find differences of opinion, but Christian love calls for patience with one another even when we can't agree. Where impatience rushes ahead to force a personal agenda, patience takes the time to try and understand where the other person is coming from and hopefully move towards reconciliation.

The second strand of the rope is kindness. Where patience is passive, kindness is active. Besides the word love, I can think of no better word to describe Christ than kind. I used to work with a minister in Boston who spoke of his hopes for his college-aged daughter. He said that he didn't really care what profession she chose or what church she attended, but his greatest hope for her was that she be kind. How different would the conflict in Corinth have been if the various factions had treated one another kindly. How

different our relationships, our community, and our world would be if we all made it a point to be kind.

In the next verses Paul lists those strands that would surely unravel our rope of love. He insists that love is not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude. Some of the Corinthian church members were conceitedly proud of their blessings, both material and spiritual, and enjoyed flaunting them. Rather than strengthening their bonds with one another, their behavior only served to spark jealousy. Closely related to such negativity, Paul says that love does not insist on its own way. Rather, love holds out the possibility that we have something to learn from others, that perhaps someone has a better idea than we do.

Paul teaches that irritability has no place in the rope of love. He's talking about the little things, the petty frustrations that we too often take out on other people. Note however, that while love can smooth over irritability, it does not exclude anger. When we see someone we love being abused, oppressed, or neglected our love can fuel the anger that leads to making things right.

Next Paul says that love is not resentful. In this context he means that love does not keep a mental list of all wrongs, real or imagined, that we've endured. Historians say that Abraham Lincoln, who as I recall was one of Tom Lamont's favorite presidents, "never forgot a kindness and never remembered a wrong" (Ibid. p. 180). This kind of approach in life would certainly strengthen the rope of love.

Paul further explains that love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, or in the misfortunes of another. On the contrary, love rejoices in the truth, or is always eager to believe the best about another person. The factions in the Corinthian church probably reveled in the downfall of their rivals, but Paul knew that such behavior would only serve to further splinter their already fractured congregation. In contrast, believing and hoping the best for a rival would bring a measure of healing.

Paul's next four characteristics of love are among my favorites—love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. When we act in love, we become willing to suffer on behalf of one another. When we act in love, we become willing to believe the best about others until proven wrong. When we act in love, we become willing to see below the surface of human beings to their great internal worth. When we act in love, we find our hope sustained, because love is rooted in God and with God there is always hope.

When we labor in love we never labor in vain. For when we labor in love, we do so knowing that love's rope forever binds us to one another and forever binds us to God. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Most merciful God, the immensity and power of your love boggles our minds—a love so great that it defeats oppression, loneliness, despair, illness, and even death. We thank you for your creative love that created order out of chaos, and beauty out of confusion. Give us new eyes to behold the exquisite wonders you have created. Give us new hearts that are quick to love and offer kindness. Give us faith to live boldly and bravely every day of our lives.

We pray this Labor Day weekend for those who are unemployed and underemployed. Help these, our sisters and brothers, find work that will meet their needs on every level. Help us make our lives a labor of love for you, O God.

We thank you for summer and the many joys and blessings we have experienced in it, through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. AMEN.

(Portions of this prayer were adapted from Thomas Gildermeister, *The Abingdon Preaching Annual 2000*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999, p. 210.)