

THE KEY
I Corinthians 13:1-13

I suppose every family has its habits and customs. One custom that Barbara and I had for a while was to talk about my upcoming sermon. Usually, it would begin with Barbara asking me, “What are you going to preach on this week?” I would then reply with a text. Barbara would then ask me about the story I was going to use to illustrate my sermon, and the point of my sermon and so forth.

We haven’t done that in a while, but if she asked me what I was going to preach about this week, the answer would have been simple. Love. This week I’m preaching about love.

When I first looked at this passage, for some reason I began thinking of all the songs I know that have love in the title. I thought of, “Love is the answer”, “All you need is love”, and “Love is a many-splendored thing” among others.

On a more serious note, if we were to ask most Christians, “What one word best describes what a Christian is to be and do?”, my guess is that love would be the most common answer to that question. But let me ask you a more fundamental question. “What is love?” Have you ever asked that question? We talk about it; we write songs and poems about it; we always seem to be in search of it, we never seem to have enough of it; we always seem to think we need more of it; but none of that answers the question, “What is it?”

The truth is that’s not an easy question to answer. It’s kind of nebulous. It’s a subjective thing. What love means to me may be very different from what it means to you. I think the big problem is that love is a feeling, and feelings by their nature are difficult to describe.

In the 13th chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians he shares some thoughts on love. To understand what Paul is saying, I think we have to understand the context in which Paul writes. Paul is speaking to the church at Corinth. In Paul’s day, Corinth was a bustling seaport. It lay on an isthmus, a small spit of land between two seas. This made it particularly advantageous for seaborne trade. If you picture the way that the Panama Canal connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, you have an idea of what made Corinth such an important port. It was sort of like that. Corinth’s location gave it a similar connection between seas.

Corinth was also a raucous town. I sort of liken it to a town like modern day New Orleans or Las Vegas. It was the sort of place where “anything goes” and what happened in Corinth, stayed in Corinth. Paul went there to preach the gospel and found a church.

We also need to understand that the Christian faith was at that time a new faith. The church was still in the process of working out what it really believed. One of the arguments that was being held was over the nature of spiritual gifts. Which of the gifts was greatest? How important are they? What is their place in Christian thinking? All of these questions and more

were being asked in Corinth and throughout the Mediterranean basin, wherever the church had planted a congregation.

Paul addresses the topic of spiritual gifts in chapter 12 of the letter to the Corinthians. Which is the greatest? Paul tries to say they are all important, but in this chapter, chapter 13, he says they all pale in comparison to love. Paul goes on to describe love from the Christian perspective.

First, he tells us that love is essential. He says if I speak in tongues of men and angels, but do not love I'm just a noisy gong. If I have the gift of prophecy and know all the mysteries and all knowledge and if I have faith, but do not have love, I am nothing. Love is essential. It is the most important thing we do.

So, if it's the most important thing we do, why do we fail so often to practice it? Truthfully, we often fall way short in this regard. How often are we judging rather than loving? How often are we holding grudges, rather than forgiving?

Right after I got out of seminary, I hadn't received a call to a church yet, so I went to work temporarily for a church as a church secretary. This was a church with a vibrant mission program. There was a man who was not a member of the church who came in to volunteer his time for one of the mission projects of the church. His name was Woody.

Woody had been a pastor at one time in his life. I don't know why he no longer served as such, but somehow, we got on the subject of one of the scandals that rock the church from time-to-time. Don't ask which one; it doesn't matter. I made the statement that while I felt that one particular group was in the wrong, I couldn't blame them too much. I felt that we, as the church, had done a lousy job of showing love to that group. His response was, "Jesus is love. We need to point to him!"

Well, if we're going to point to Jesus, then let's talk about how Jesus loved. Jesus often expressed love in ways that were scandalous by the standards of the surrounding culture. The Pharisees even complained to the disciples about it. "Why does your master eat with sinners?" they asked. Really! If we're going to point to Jesus as love, then we need to love like Jesus loved- all encompassing, completely, without judging.

To a more central point, Woody was right about one thing. Jesus is love- which is all the more reason I need to be loving. I'm supposed to be his servant. If our testimony and our doesn't reflect love, many will never know that Jesus is love. If we don't have love, nothing else matters.

The second thing that Paul teaches us is that love is practical. He says it a little differently. He says, "Love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous, love does not brag, love does not boast, love is not arrogant and so forth." I once heard a Catholic priest say that love was based on truth. Folks, love is based on grace. It's unconditional. We don't earn it. It's not

based on what we believe or what we choose to do, it's based on the fact that God loves unconditionally. It's a good thing, too! Because if we had to earn it, none of us would.

Barbara and I used to love to go sailing. Several years ago, we were sailing into Nassau harbor and we caught our first sight of land off in the hazy distance. It was a lighthouse on the Porgee rocks, which stand guard over the entrance to Nassau harbor. For over a century that lighthouse guided ships safely into Nassau harbor. That is what love is for us- a guiding light for us in the darkest of nights. It's a lighthouse light. It's a compass that never fails. Never!

Love is also permanent. Paul says, "Now abide faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love." Everything else fades away. Faith, hope and love are the only things that really last. Everything else fades away.

In 1817 the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote the following poem. "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings. Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair." Around a century and a half later the rock band Kansas wrote a song called, "Dust in the Wind" based on that poem. The sentiment pretty much describes everything touched by human hands. Buildings crumble to the ground; memories fade; money is spent, but love? Love endures.

The perfect love of Jesus Christ endures forever. It's the key to everything. If you want to be more like Jesus, be more loving. It's that simple. If you want to serve Jesus, be more loving. Let your speech be full of his love, his mercy, his patience, his kindness, and his forgiveness. In your life, model love in everything you do and you will be blessed. Love is essential for the Christian, it is practical, and it is permanent and it is the key to everything. Because it is the love of Christ- the grace of Christ, that saves.