

## Love, Love, Love

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and God's love incarnate, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, amen.

It's springtime and love is in the air! (SLIDE) The Beatles claimed "All you Need is Love," and Tina Turner famously asked in song, "What's Love Got to Do With It?" In 1984 the British-American Rock Band Foreigner had their biggest number one hit with the song "I Want to Know What Love Is." All those songs were hits in the 1960s and 70s, and they're no less true in the 2020s. We all need to be loved. Love's got everything to do with it, and we all still want to know what this crazy little thing called love really is.

In today's scripture reading we just heard Saint Paul's most famous and memorable words about love. (SLIDE) This chapter from First Corinthians is arguably the highest expression of love in all of literature. This "Love" chapter functions somewhat like an aside in a play. Paul has already explained how the many spiritual gifts possessed by the people of the Church in Corinth are like the many parts of the human body. He ends chapter 12 by exhorting the Corinthians to strive for the greater spiritual gift and to listen up because he's going show them, and us, an even more excellent way. Okay, Paul, what is this more excellent way?

Apparently, the congregation in this diverse, metropolitan city was divided, not just by the different teachings of Paul, Apollos, and others. They were also

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arguing over whose spiritual gifts were greater. It seems like a very petty argument to me, but was evidently important enough to Paul to add an entire section of his letter to deal with the argument concerning who was more important in the church. In the middle of his discourse on spiritual gifts, Paul stops to explain his definition and the importance of love. Most of us have heard this chapter read at weddings. What better time to hear such a beautiful analysis of love? Lexie reminded me she read this very chapter at her uncle, Trevor's wedding. I believe this is the most extreme, radical chapter in the entire Bible. I hope by the end of this sermon you will all agree with me...

Here's what I mean... You can do more good works than Jesus Christ himself, but if you have no love, you miss the whole point of the Gospel. Said another way, you can be more "Christian" than Christ, but if you aren't living a life of love, you have missed the point of the Gospel message. Paul begins this love chapter by saying you can speak with the tongues of men or of angels, but if you don't have love, you're nothing more than a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. Remember, Paul is writing this letter to the good people of the city of Corinth. (SLIDE) This was a Greek city and the Greeks were known for their great orators. About 400 years before Paul lived, a man named Aristotle wrote a book called Rhetoric. (SLIDE) In that book Aristotle established rules for public debate that are still studied by students of public debate today. I wish more

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universities required reading Aristotle today. Perhaps there would be far less antisemitism and hate speech on our campuses. In ancient Greece, there were many gods and every god had a temple. People in Paul's time were also familiar with the monotonous tone of a gong or the clashing sound of a cymbal. Historians tell us there was a big gong or cymbal hanging at the entrance of most pagan temples. (SLIDE) When people came to worship, they hit these noisy percussion instruments in order to awaken the pagan gods so they would listen to their prayers. So, Paul is saying it's all right if you're a fine speaker, or teacher or even a fine preacher. However, your fine words are as futile as the act of striking a gong or a cymbal to awaken a pagan idol if you are not committed to a life of love.

St. Paul continues, "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing . . ." (SLIDE) Friends, that's radical. That's extreme. Paul is saying love is even more important than faith. "If I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing . . ." This is revolutionary. Think about those people in our society who call themselves followers of Jesus, but they hate Moslems, they hate Jews, they hate Mormons, they even hate other Christians who do not believe exactly as they believe. Today, our society is more divided than any other time in my life. This one hates gays. That one hates trans. Another one hates blacks or Asians and yet another hates whites. And we do it in

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the name of Jesus. A local pastor brought his 13 or 14 year old son to one of the Revive Ohio rallies several years back. He kept bringing up the subject of homosexuality and pronouncing that God hates that sin most of all. His young son then repeated his father's words, but with much more hatefulness and vile. This man was, and still is, a pastor right here in Darke county. I pray one day he will read this chapter from Saint Paul and begin to understand what a big deal love is to our God... I'm sorry if the radical nature of this Gospel message offends any of you, but these are not my words. These are the Holy Spirit inspired words of Saint Paul. If you doubt me just re-read the last line of this chapter. "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

Paul isn't finished yet. He goes on to say that you can give over all you have to the poor, but if you don't have love, you are nothing... You might ask, "Pastor, how can that be?" Surely all my good works must count for something... Listen to these words from Saint Paul once again... "If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship . . ." That's the NRSV translation. Many of us remember the King James Version: "though I give my body to be burned . . ." Some of you remember the Vietnam War when Buddhist priests would pour gasoline all over their bodies, then set themselves on fire. (SLIDE) You can be seized with that kind of religious extremism, and it will profit you nothing without love. Let me say it again so that no one can misunderstand. You can be more

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Christian than Christ himself, but if you are not committed to a life of love, you've missed the whole message of the gospel.

Of course, St. Paul is only expounding on the teachings of Jesus. It was Jesus who first said the great commandment was to love . . . to love God and to love one's neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40). This is how the world will know you follow Jesus, not by how many Bible verses you can quote; not by your perfect attendance in worship; not by giving a million dollars to the church well, you could always try that one. (SLIDE) These are wonderful acts of devotion, but none of them matter if you have let your life be taken over with malice and resentment and hate.

This is to say that love is the central task of the Christian. If this is how people will know we are followers of Jesus, isn't this what we should be doing every hour of every day? Bill Wilson pastors an inner-city church in New York City. He himself has been stabbed twice as he ministered to the people of the community surrounding the church. (SLIDE) Once a Puerto Rican woman became involved in the church and was led to Christ. She came to Pastor Wilson and said, "I want to do something to help with the church's ministry." Wilson asked her what her talents were. She could think of nothing -she couldn't even speak English -but she did love children. So, he put her on one of the church's buses that went into neighborhoods and transported kids to church. Every week

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she performed her duties. She would find the worst-looking kid on the bus, put him on her lap and whisper over and over the only words she had learned in English: “I love you. Jesus loves you.” After several months, she became attached to one little boy in particular. The boy didn’t speak. He came to Sunday School every week with his sister and sat on the woman’s lap, but he never made a sound. Each week she would tell him all the way to Sunday School and all the way home, “I love you and Jesus loves you.” One day, to her amazement, the little boy turned around and stammered, “I -I -I love you too!” Then he put his arms around her and gave her a big hug. That was 2:30 on a Sunday afternoon. At 6:30 that night he was found dead. His own mother had beaten him to death and thrown his body in the trash... “I love you and Jesus loves you,” were some of the last words this little boy heard in his short life. The reason he heard them was because an immigrant woman from Puerto Rico was committed to love people in Jesus’ name. Here’s what we need to remember: when she held that child on her lap and whispered, “I love you. Jesus loves you,” she was fulfilling *all* the law and the Prophets. When she held that child in her arms and whispered those words, her witness was more authentic than all those who strut their piety around and claim to be righteous.

(SLIDE) Tina Turner asked, “What’s love got to do with it?” Let me say it as plainly as I am able. Love is the central task of the Christian. May you love

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God and love your neighbor first and above all else. May all your good works flow from the never-ending fountain of God's love. Amen.