

A Church Re-Membering Love
Sunday, January 27, 2019
1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

I love a lot of things. I love Jesus. I love the church. I love my husband. I love my daughter. I love my dog. I also love popcorn, and running, and 80-degree weather... who and what do you love? And how do you show it?

This month Hallmark and other retailers are begging this question as they offer us ideas of things to buy and ways to show our love to the special people in our lives. From chocolates to flowers to diamonds, there's something in every price range, something for every buyer.

Just as there are different gifts, there are different ways to show love. Gary Chapman has built his legacy on this concept. In his famous book published in 1995 he identifies five love languages and argues that each person has one primary and one secondary expression. The five love languages he identifies are: receiving gifts, quality time, words of affirmation, acts of service, and physical touch. His work suggests that we naturally show love in the ways that we want to receive love. The key to healthy relationships, according to Chapman, is learning the love languages of others and then learning how to speak their language.

Anyone who has ever tried this knows just how exhausting – and yet rewarding it can be. It takes practice and discipline. It's just like learning another spoken language. We learn one word at a time, then we learn how to practice it. With time and effort, eventually we can apply what we learn and after time, we might even become fluent showers of love to those around us.

In a marriage this may look like a gift-giver learning how to enact service for the other. Maybe this looks like doing laundry or dishes, making the bed, or mowing the lawn. And in return, the other might trade in productivity for taking time to find exactly the right gift.

Love is hard work!

For the last several weeks, we have been talking about our spiritual gifts. We have named some of our gifts and thought about how they might work together for the building up of the church. We have thought about unity amongst difference, acknowledging that it takes us all to embody the church in our world. Talking and thinking about it is great... but actually doing it is really hard.

Like learning another love language, it requires practice and commitment. We have to build stamina little by little, but it will come.

Today's reading from 1 Corinthians is one that we often hear in part. It seems like every wedding and every movie with a wedding scene contains a reading from verses 4 through 8.

We've heard it so often we can almost recite it from memory...

love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous, love does not brag... and while these are all helpful things to remember when committing ourselves to a partner in marriage, Paul is not writing to a lover, nor is he talking about romance.

Remember, Paul is writing to a church. The Corinthian church... the same church that is experiencing conflict and forgetting how to be the body of Christ rather than the body of Rome.

When Paul writes of love in this letter, he isn't talking about the eros or romantic love that Chapman's work focuses on. Paul chooses the word agape which describes a more platonic, brotherly or sisterly love. Paul's agape is the glue which will hold the Corinthian people together as they get about the work of following Jesus.

A closer reading of the "love verses" (in context) reveals that before and after these more famous verses, Paul reminds the Corinthians about their gifts and about their limited nature.

Yes, we are a differently gifted people, yes we have much to offer, but we are still human. And if we do not offer our gifts in love to one another and the church ... well... Maybe we'd better not offer them at all. Learning to love one another with the love described in this letter, is the Corinthians' most important survival skill. It is the KEY to doing the hard work of sharing our gifts.

Love is patient. Love is kind and not jealous. Love does not brag and it is not arrogant. Love does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, it is not provoked or take into account wrongs suffered in the past. (v. 4 – 5)

Paul knows that it's easy to talk about unity, but once the Corinthian people start to live into their commitments of sharing their different gifts, things are going to get tough. And so he gives them the most important skill to make it work for the long journey of life together: love.

Remember that Paul's vision for the church is counter-cultural just like the ministry of Jesus.

The rhythms of our world teach us to be productive and efficient, but the mission of the church then (and now) has a different and perhaps slower rhythm... One that calls us to: heal the sick, to welcome the stranger, and to feed the hungry.

No wonder the people in the Corinthian church needed to be re-programmed to do the work of the church while they were living their day-to-day lives in the world of Rome!

You and I are no different. We live our lives in the real world. We wake up, we go to school or work, we interact with real people who are sometimes difficult and sometimes not. We try our best to make good grades, to pass the tests, or to earn a large enough paycheck that we can pay our bills, sleep through the night, and wake up to do it all over again. Over time our bodies begin to go through these steps on autopilot.

Without thinking much about it we do these tasks, we go through the motions day in and day out. We live in unintentional communities that are built on the necessary exchanges of student to teacher or employee to supervisor, each one of us comfortably confined to spaces of repetition and similarity. Within those spaces – where most of our lives take place – we are training ourselves with unintentional rhythms of work, rest, and relationships.

The problem is, the church shouldn't be so comfortably confined... that isn't how God has called us to live.

We know this because we are called to live our lives like Jesus lived. And Jesus wasn't confined to the rhythms of fishing or carpentry... Jesus carved out a different way, a different rhythm that focused solely on the well-being of others. His day to day routine consisted of sitting close to lepers, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, mending broken relationships, listening to those society had rendered voiceless, and sharing meals with outcasts. This is what we are called to do as followers of Christ.

It is this work to which we are called, it is for this work that we are gifted, and it is in this work that we find the very presence of God.

It isn't easy. It isn't easy at all. It never has been and it was never supposed to be. Remember the Corinthians who struggled and lost their way. They let the rhythms of life they'd learned in their day-to-day take the precedence over the ways that God was calling them to live in communion with one another.

But Paul reminds them (and us) that when we are together, in church, we are teaching our spirits and training our bodies to the rhythms of a life lived in Christ. When we gather together as the church, we embody the love of Jesus: healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, setting captives free, and welcoming strangers and outcasts. This is what it means to embody the love of Christ, and so this is what we practice when we come together as church.

Loving like this is hard, because like the Corinthians, we are a group of people who have different gifts, different interests, and different languages of love. Some of us want to feed the hungry, others want to work at the clothing closet. Some of us want to volunteer at buddy break, others want to serve in worship care.

Some of us want to teach and lead Bible study, others want to organize fellowship opportunities. Some of us want to grow the church through outreach and others want to care for those who are already here. Yes, there are many gifts, many loves, and many ways to embody Christ in our world.

Love is hard work! Over time, as we continue in this work together, Remembering the example of Jesus and practicing the skill of God's love and offering our gifts for the building up of the community, we are bound to slip up, to have moments where we are not at our best. In these moments our muscle memory of love can help us out... we can learn to trust one another, to forgive one another and to experience God's grace in communion with one another. After all, not one of us is perfect.

We have an opportunity today to begin remember and practice this love as we share a sacred meal. Each time we come to this table, we receive the grace of God through Jesus; but let us not only receive it and be done. Let us remember and embody the way that Jesus lived and loved.

May the practices we learn at this table, the blessing of the food, the passing of the bread, the sharing of the cup... come alive through us like the rhythm of love that is patient and kind, that is not arrogant, but puts others first, and even learns to love in different languages.

You see, when we worship together and especially when we share this holy meal, we are practicing, training our bodies for the work of love. We are establishing a new kind of muscle memory so that hopefully, when we leave these pews and this sanctuary, we will be able to re-member the grace we have received and the love that we are called to share out there.

Because here and now, according to Paul, we see in a mirror dimly, we know only in part... but one day, we will see the full picture and all of this practicing, and all of our failed attempts, will give way to the clear picture, which is the Kingdom of God.

But for now, while we see only in part, let us keep on gathering in rooms like this, keep passing the bread and sharing the cup, keep building our muscle memory for sharing grace with one another... so that we might re-member the love of Christ here and everywhere we go.

May it be so. Amen.

Benediction:

As you leave this place of worship, this training ground where we teach our bodies the rhythms of life in Christ,

Go with grace, recognizing that here in this place you have received the grace of God
who welcomes you to this table.

Go in peace, knowing that the God who created you calls you out into the world
with a message of hope for all that is broken.

And Go in love, remembering the skills and the rhythm of love learned here today
And embodying that same love everywhere you may go.

Amen.