

⁶ This I say by way of concession, not of command. ⁷ I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind.

1Cor. 7:8 To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. ⁹ But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

1Cor. 12:27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

1Cor. 13:1 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.

1Cor. 13:4 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.

I am thankful that our Polar Vortex is past for the time being, and I hope that most things can return to normal for us. Speaking of normal, it is normal for us to hear these words from our NT this morning, and to say “Hey, we’ve heard these before! These words were spoken at our wedding!” I can report to you that I have probably used these words in 150, possibly 200 weddings that I have officiated. Why did I use these words about love? Well, they are seen as traditional. And, more than anywhere else, they speak of love. But I need us to understand that just like the extreme cold of last week, these words are not normal, and they are not traditional, and we cannot let them become normal.

Right off the bat there are two things we must know about Paul's words here that are usually not discussed. 1) Paul did **not** write these words because he wanted nice words available for weddings. In fact back in chapter 7 of this same book, Paul advises people to be like he is, which is UN-married. He suggests that they do not get married, probably because he believes that Christ would soon return and bring God's new world here. He wanted people instead to prepare for the coming of God's Kingdom.

There is a second reason that these words are not normal. We cannot just pick them up and start talking about "*...love is patient, love is kind...*" These words are for people in Corinth, Greece, for the church there that Paul has helped to start. This church has crazy problems. What is the biggest problem? Well, that could get messy. But one problem is this: they believe in CHARISMATA or what we would call SPIRITUAL GIFTS. They believe that they can work miracles, that they can heal others, that they can predict the future, and that they can speak the language of angels! They call this *speaking in tongues*. Paul says that this is a real thing. But Paul doesn't like the fact that these people seem to like this too much. Instead of seeing it as a supernatural gift of God, about which they should be humble and holy, some of the Corinthians have started to do this to show off. They say "look at me, and how special and holy that I am, because I can do this!!! In fact, this probably means that I am superior to you other Christians, and I like that!"

Paul will be very unhappy about this. In fact Paul will spend all of what we call chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians talking about these different gifts from God. And he speaks of how they should be used. In fact, there is only one way that they should be used: they are for building up the Body of Christ, the Church. If God has given the gift of healing, people are to use it to benefit others, not to show off! Paul says the same about other gifts. And Paul lists the gifts, and he puts the gift of speaking in tongues LAST in his list. And then he is actually going to go after their love of it in our words for this morning.

After Paul talks about how these Charismata should be used, he says "You know friends, there is actually a gift that is better than all of those listed, it is the best way of all, and it is this..." And then Paul starts to talk about LOVE. But again, before we treat this like something that is normal, we have to know that Paul's word for LOVE is not the same as our word for love.

In many ways it is sad that we only have our one word for love. Can we truly mean the same thing by the many ways that we use this word? After all, some people love sports teams. Others love old cars. Others love cheeseburgers. Others love fabric. Some love fine electric guitars. Others love their wife or husband. Some love poor children who don't have enough to eat. Some love God. Now, think about that list. How can the LOVE that is being used by the same thing?

Luckily for us, the Bible actually uses 4 different words for love just in the NT. Ancient Greek did this. And Paul the writer actually uses the most special word of all for love, agape, when he talks about love here in chapter 13. This love is one directional, and it is unconditional, and it is totally a gift. It was seen as only the love that God could have for us. They didn't think that people had pure enough hearts to do this. This love means to care for the well-being of someone in which the giver of the love cannot be paid back.

When you do agape, it goes out from you to another person, for their benefit, even if you get nothing in return. This is love for a drug addict or wayward child, where the love will not be returned at all. This is love and concern for people you do not know. You give this love because it will help someone else. This is the greatest, purest love possible. It has nothing to do with getting something back for your love investment. In fact, this love will probably hurt. It means that you simply love without limit or without expectation. No wonder they did not think that humans could do this kind of love! But Paul says "Wait a minute! We are going to do this now. We are at least going to try this now. And this is how it will be."

As we get ready for Holy Communion, I hope that we can reflect more deeply on this kind of love. If we are gladly going to believe in God's great love for us, and to humbly celebrate the sacrificial love of Jesus who would die for us, then maybe we should walk it that one step farther: what about our love for others? Are we going to Love as God loves? Are we going to love other people who are forgotten and ignored. Every week when we lift up prayer concerns, I wait for someone to say "Let's pray for children from Guatemala who have been separated from their moms and dads at the border in Texas. Let's pray for the opium addicts across Ohio and this nation who are living in hell every day, right here. Let's pray for those who are victims of human trafficking on Super Bowl weekend." Having them in our hearts, so that we hurt for them, and want to do something for their benefit, that is agape. And Paul says that this is better than speaking the language of angels.

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Let's prepare our hearts for Holy Communion.