

“...only love can do that.”
A Sermon
By Shelly Davis
Text: I Corinthians 13:1-13

It takes more “strength to love,” than to hate.

It takes *more* “strength to love,” than to hate.

I am learning even more now, in these days,
that it takes more “strength to love,” than to hate.

In perhaps The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s
most famous book,

- the collection of sermons entitled *The Strength to Love*,
- published in 1963,
- King included a sermon titled, “*Loving Your Enemies*,” first delivered on Christmas Day, 1957 at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

King wrote and preached,

“Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; ***only love can do that.***

Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction.

So, when Jesus says “Love your enemies,” he is setting forth a profound and ultimately inescapable admonition.

Have we not come to such an impasse in the modern world that we must love our enemies—or else? The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.”

— Martin Luther King Jr., Strength to Love (Harper & Row, 1963)

The Apostle Paul’s well-loved, oft quoted, I Corinthians 13 is:

- one of the most recognizable scriptures in our entire Bible,
- a scripture many of us know by heart,
- and a frequent, excellent choice for memorial services and weddings.

Yet, as beautiful and appropriate as I Corinthians 13 can be for a funeral or a wedding, and even as a touchstone for one of the most important covenantal relationships of human life, here’s this morning’s “*remember this*” moment:

Paul wrote these words for the early church in Corinth.

- Not for a couple about to wed, not even for a couple celebrating a silver or golden anniversary, but for a *community* of believers,

a *community* of Jesus' followers, who, to be honest, were behaving quite badly!

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth

- was a missive to a part of the early church located in a large, prosperous urban center in Greece that was organized into several house churches and regularly gathered together as an *ekklesia* or larger “assembly” or “church”
- the section of the letter *leading up to* our scripture for today—sometimes called “the love chapter” includes a discussion of
 - the many different spiritual gifts that the people in that first-century church in Corinth had and how each of those gifts:
 - was of *equal* value—as were each of the *people* blessed with those gifts
 - and *all* those gifts and *all* of those people are necessary—indeed *essential*—in making up the fullness of the body of Christ
 - Yes, Paul wrote,
 - “There are many members but one body. . .
 - Now *you* are the body of Christ,
 - and individually members of it.”

All that clarification and explication about the power and richness and necessity of a diversity of gifts in the one body of Christ that we call church, is the *prelude* for what we now know as the 13th chapter of I Corinthians. The last sentence in the last verse in the 12th chapter reads:

“And I will show you still a more excellent way.”

Even with the remarkable and extravagant offering of spiritual gifts present in any one church, or the whole church, or expression of the body of Christ—then or now, Paul claims there is *“still a more excellent way.”*

And that more excellent way is *love*.

“...only love can do that.”

- Not love of a primary partner or spouse.
- Not love of our own child.
- Not love of our parents or siblings or anyone else we happen to be related to.
- Not even love of ourselves *except as* a means for us to understand the depth of the love that we are called in Christ to have for our neighbor.

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

It is important for us to consider that the Greek language—the original language of our New Testament—includes *four* different words that we translate into the *one* English word “love.” And while the semantic range for all four Greek words is expansive, the different words are used to connote different meanings in the Greek, while in English, we typically use the one word, “love.”

EROS: refers to sexual love and probably derived its name from the Greek god of love.

STORGE (*stor-gay*): is the type of love signifying the natural affection between kin—parents and children; siblings; extended family.

PHILEO (*fil-E-o*): Is a Greek word for *love* that signifies, “...spontaneous natural affection, with more feeling than reason” (Elwell, p. 1357).

- *phileo* is, “to be a friend to... to be fond of or have affection for or attachment to an individual or object; a matter of sentiment or feeling”.
- As in Philadelphia—the city of brotherly love.

AGAPE (*ah-GA-pey*):

- Is the Greek word for love that by far appears most frequently in the New Testament and throughout the 13th chapter of I Corinthians.
- This Greek word for love, “...mean[s] moral goodwill which proceeds from esteem, principle, or duty, rather than attraction or charm... [it] means to love the undeserving, despite disappointment and rejection... (Elwell, p. 1357).

- And this is the Greek word that the King James Version of the Bible translated as “*charity*”—
 - a word that far too often gets reduced to benevolent feelings or donations to aid people who are poor, ill, or needy
 - and as important as “*charity*” in that sense may be,

Agape love, wrote Paul, involves faithfulness, commitment, and an act of the will.

- This unconditional love is the love God has for us that was embodied or incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth whom we know as the Christ,
- *AND* it is the love we are called to have for one another.

This is not love rooted in good feelings toward one another. It is love that originates in a conscious, deliberate choice—*an act of will*—to recognize every other human being as a gift of God.

Every other human being as a gift of God.

“...only love can do that.”

If God is love, and,

as Cornell West says,

“Justice is what love looks like in public,”

then the human encounter—your encounter, my encounter—with the face of the God of love and the

face of my neighbors, my friends and my enemies, is a struggle:

- To see one another
- *to love one another*
- To hear one another
- *to love one another*
- To BE WITH one another
- *to love one another*
- To kneel alongside one another
 - In witness
 - In prayer
 - In solidarity
 - In struggle
 - In hope
- I know “...only love can do that”
—in and with us

Every single one of us knows that this kind of love—*agape*—is a whole lot easier to talk about than it is to do.

- This is part of the reason we often include a prayer of confession within our weekly worship.
- This is why we need “*strength to love.*”

Those first-century Corinthian followers of Jesus knew this too and their behavior—and misbehavior—proved it. One way we can tell this is that Paul chose to spell out in this letter what this kind of love—*agape*—looks like in action.

Eugene Peterson translated these words of Paul from

the Greek in *The Message* as we heard it read today:

Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always "me first,"
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.

You and I are not called to follow Jesus so we can

- feel good,
- be more popular,
- get an express ticket into heaven,
- stay out of trouble,
- grab power, or
- become better than everyone else.

We are called to, and choose to, follow Jesus *to love others as God loves us.*

- We love because God first loved us.
- We choose to love our neighbors unconditionally—
 - please note Paul did not say we will necessarily *like* our neighbors—but
 - we make the choice and the commitment to *love* our neighbors because that is what we are called and, yes, even as Congregationalists, we are *commanded* to do.

28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” **29** Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; **30** you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ **31** The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

[Mark 12: 28-31]

We gather as the one body of Christ called the church to

- teach and
- learn and
- remind and
- challenge and
- equip and
- encourage and

- walk with each other in this “more excellent way.”
 - The way of love.
 - *Agape*.
 - Unconditional love.
 - Love that is *action* not feeling.

Love that is patient; love that is kind; love that is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

Love that does not insist on its own way; that is not irritable or resentful; Love that does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love that never ends.

Love that teaches us as much or possibly even more about ourselves than it may about those we are commanded to love.

Love that animates our faith;
 love that expresses and generates our hope;
 love that drives out hate;
 love that demonstrates true toughness as gentleness;
 love that dares to “speak truth to power”;
 love that points to the God who is love;
 love that is the greatest spiritual gift of all.

To love in this way—

- unconditionally,
- giving fully of oneself, without expectation of anything in return—

- simply to love as we are loved by God—
- *this* is the “more excellent way.”

“...only love can do that.”

What’s this kind of love—*agape*—got to do with being Christian, a follower of Jesus?

Everything.

Absolutely everything.

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

—First John 4:7-8

Please God, may we make it so.

Amen.

In a time of hate
Love is an act of resistance
In a time of fear
Faith is an act of resistance
In a time of misinformation
Education is an act of resistance
In a time of poor leadership

Community is an act of resistance

In a time like this
Joy is an act of resistance

Resist. Resist. Resist.

—Loryn Brantz