

## The Greatest Thing in the World©

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

February 3, 2019 Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

That text from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1 Corinthians is one that is a favorite of many people. It was my mother's favorite passage and was read at her funeral. It is the text that is chosen for weddings more than any other Scripture passage.

There *is* something poetic and beautiful about the way it is written. And while that is pleasant to our ears, there is some danger of allowing the beauty of the words to overpower the meaning and message that Paul is sending to the Christians in Corinth, who were not getting along very good, and to us who are a Christian community, today.

I'm convinced that most couples I work with in preparing for their wedding service, often times, find this chapter to be appealing, more for the poetry than the meaning. But while Paul's words are about love, he is not speaking of romantic love. Paul is talking about a love that runs deep and is enduring. He is referring to a love that is self-sacrificing, ... that puts the other person first. In the Greek language the word for romantic love is *eros*. It's where we get our word *erotic*. It is the kind of love that is physical and that involves a great deal of physical pleasure and desire. It is often mutual and there is a sense of wanting to give to and please the other person ... but there is certainly a large element of self ... of ego ... in love that is *eros*.

The word that Paul uses, here in this text ... the Greek word for love ... is *agape*. *Agape* love is different from *eros* love. *Agape* love makes sacrifices for the needs of the other person. It is, as Paul says, patient and kind. It is not the kind of love that is envious or jealous of others. *Agape* love would not be arrogant or rude to others. One would not boast in an attempt to build up oneself above the other person.

Paul writes, "*Love (agape love) does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, it endures all things.*"

This is a mature kind of love. Of course, it is appropriate for using at weddings, because, while couples should have that romantic, *eros* love as part of what they feel ... they also need *agape* love – the long-lasting, enduring, mature love in order to build a strong marriage and family.

It is a love that becomes patient and hopefully tolerant of those little habits and quirks that used to be so cute, but sometimes eventually become rather irritating. It is a love that allows one person to be able to give up a dream in order for the other to realize hers. It is a love that takes care of the other person when they are sick; that keeps loving when they are depressed or having lost their zest for loving back at the moment. It is a love that perseveres in the face of financial difficulties and other crisis that life can bring.

Even more than that, however, it is the kind of love Jesus talks about, when he says to love your neighbor, as you love yourself. I am amazed at how often we are ready to say things about a brother or sister in Christ. There has been so much discussion lately about

right wing conservatives versus left wing liberals and we're not just talking politics. We are referring to people who are followers of Jesus ... brothers and sisters in Christ.

I am including myself when I say we easily do this, without even thinking. Words or looks that slip out from us, without our ever thinking about them being critical or hurtful ... or unloving. You see this *agape* love is the kind of love that is tolerant and loves in spite of differences.

Our world today isn't so different from the world that the Corinthian church found themselves in. Corinth was a major cosmopolitan city in Achaia. It was filled with idolatry and immorality. The Christians in Corinth were surrounded by corruption and sin. And they struggled to know what freedom in Christ meant. Some of them thought it meant they could just blend in with the rest of their society. Some of them were confused about the idol worship around them. And they were also abusing the gifts of the spirit they had so recently come to have as a new church.

Paul is writing this letter about *agape* love to these members of the Corinthian church, in that setting. He is saying that it doesn't matter what gift the Holy Spirit has given them ... whether it be teaching or preaching or speaking in tongues ... none of those things are useful, if they don't grow up into mature, loving Christians AND if they do not love. He says, "*When I was a child, I spoke like child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.*"

That is what Paul is telling them to do now. Put an end to childish ways and learn to love with this *agape* love that is mature and selfless. You no longer have your identity in the world around you. Instead, you have become a *new creation* as you are *in Christ* ... as you are a believer and follower of Him.

Ah, but all of us know these things, don't we? We know how the Bible teaches us to love. We have heard the stories, the commandments, we know how Jesus lived and what he taught about loving others, turning the other cheek, giving your coat, caring for the poor, the hungry. We know that Jesus loved the sinners ... those whom the righteous people condemned.

But, when it comes right down to it, don't most of us have this human nature, where we still focus on self? We still have a difficult time relating to those who think differently than we do? We have a tendency to say negative things about others ... even other Christians ... and why would we do that? Because, we are like children. It makes us feel bigger, more righteous, less like sinners. But it is not loving, at least it is not *agape* love, is it?

So how can we possibly love this way? How can we be the kind of mature, loving Christians that Paul so beautifully writes about in his first letter to the Corinthian church? I think our answer comes from Jesus himself.

Jesus says, "Abide in me, and I will abide in you." He uses, as he often does, illustrations from farming or gardening ... planting seeds, harvesting the crops. Listen to what Jesus says in John 15:5-8:

*I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*

Jesus says he is the vine and we are the branches. He says we can not do *anything* apart from him. It's like the branches of a vine ... if you pluck off a branch from a grape vine, it surely won't have a chance of living, let alone of producing any kind of fruit. It's worthless and would be thrown into the pile of dried up rubbish to be burned.

Yet when we stay connected to him, we are alive and able to produce much fruit – and in this case, we are much more able to love the way Paul tells the Corinthians, and us, to love.

The only way to ever be mature enough to love with this *agape* love that Paul says is expected of Christ's church – the only **possible** way to love our neighbors, as Jesus commanded – is to have this deep, clear, personal relationship with the one who is our Vine.

We are Christians ... Christ believers, and only by clinging to him, as if we were branches attached – only by allowing ourselves to be in places where we will learn and grow, to be willing to go where he sends us and trust what he tells us – only then, will we know how to love the *agape* way, which is the same way Christ has loved us – sacrificing, patient, tolerant, forgiving, enduring, unconditional love.

In 1880, Henry Drummond wrote a great little book based on this text from 1 Corinthians 13 titled *The Greatest Thing in the World*.<sup>1</sup> He writes that everyone has asked the great question of antiquity as of the modern world: what is the *summon bonum* – the supreme good? We have only this one life to live so what is the noblest object of desire, the supreme gift to covet?

He writes many people would say that faith would be the greatest thing in the world. But he argues that that isn't it. He says Paul was writing to people who had been trying to live according to the law – the Ten Commandments. It is love – our love for God – that is the greatest thing because if we love, truly love God, we would never use God's name in vain, we would never steal or murder or covet our neighbor. We would be thrilled to keep a Sabbath day – a day to just focus on our love for the Lord. The law would be easy to keep if loving God was at the top of everything else. Paul writes that “love is the fulfilling of the law.” (Romans 13:10)

Peter says, “above all things have fervent love among yourselves.” *Above all things!* (1 Peter 1:4-8)

John writes in 1 John 4: God is love...<sup>19</sup>We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup>Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup>The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

It takes all the way back to Deuteronomy 6:4-5: <sup>4</sup>"Hear, O Israel: [The Lord our God, the Lord *is* one! <sup>5</sup>You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." Jesus said it is the greatest commandment – to love God above all else, with everything you are.

And Jesus added a second commandment that is next to greatest: To love our neighbor as we love ourselves. (Matthew 22:39)

Paul ends this chapter answering that question – What is the supreme good for us in this life? He writes: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Love for God and love for each other – that is the greatest thing in the world. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Henry Drummon, *The Greatest Thing in the World*, Grosset & Dunlap, New York ©1880