

It is difficult for us to talk about love in a concrete way. We want to join the poets and soar off to some perfect place and live happily ever after.

Our Corinthians text for today is habitually read at weddings. And it is a good reading about love – and certainly good advice to newlyweds about love being patient and kind, not insisting on its own way and all those helpful ways that will make married life easier.

Actually, Paul wrote this text to address some concrete problems in the church at Corinth. To read it at a wedding is really to take it out of its context.

Paul stayed at Corinth for 18 months – the longest he stayed and any one place among his missionary work except for Ephesus. Paul knows the people and the church. The context for this chapter on love follows chapters where Paul has tried to address concrete problems in the church. In chapter 8 the problem is with the members who buy food that has been sacrificed to idols. Why should that be a problem? There is only one God, so these idols do not really exist. So why not eat the food offered to idols? The issue is the Jewish food laws. The Corinthians don't even know the Jewish food laws. To them the issue is freedom.

If some who are weak in the faith think it is wrong, then it might cause them to stumble. Some don't want their freedom curtailed. So how does the congregation deal with that issue?

In chapter 11, the problem is with the congregation as it comes together to celebrate the Lord's Supper. It seems that some come early and go ahead and eat the meal without waiting on others. Some eat all the food and those who come late are left out. Paul reminds them that the Lord's Supper is a symbolic meal and it should not be a cause of dissension in the church. How will the church deal with this issue?

In Chapter 12 the issue is spiritual gifts. Paul uses his great metaphor of the body to help them look at these spiritual gifts. The body has many parts. A hand belongs to the body.

An ear, even though it is not an eye, belongs to the body. As matter of fact, it takes all the parts of the body working together to be a body. If one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers. If one part rejoices, all rejoice. These spiritual gifts – prophecy, teaching, workers of miracles, healing, speaking in tongues – this arguing about which is the greatest has become a problem. How will the church address this issue?

It is in this context that Paul writes his chapter on love. The last verse of chapter 12 says, "I will show you a more excellent way." By more excellent, Paul is calling for the church to deal with these problems in the context of the Christian Community of love.

Paul examines his own behavior in light of this understand of love. What does it matter if I can speak in even the tongues of men and angels – if I have no love? That person is just a resounding gong or a clanging symbol. What does it matter if a person has the gift of prophecy if that person has no love and eats up all the food before others can get there? What does it matter that a person has faith that can move mountains if the person has no love? What does it matter that you give your body into slavery for the cause of another if you do not have love? That is probably what "giving your body to be burned" meant.

To pay off debt, someone would become a slave – be branded with at hot iron – to work off the debt. If what you do is not done out of love, it is of no value. Paul thought of behavior, his work as done out of the basis of love.

# PILGRIM

## CHURCH

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How do you characterize this love? Paul uses the word AGAPE. Eros was physical love Valentine Day is coming. Filia was brotherly or sisterly love – Philadelphia – Adolphus – Greek word for brother – Filia – Greek word for love – Philadelphia – City of Brotherly Love. Agape was self giving love. Paul understood this love as the way of Christ. It is patient, it is kind. It does not envy or boast and is not proud. It is or rude and is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered and does not keep a record of wrongs. It does not delight in evil, but in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always preservers. This love transcends time. Prophecy, speaking in tongues, healing – all those gifts will end. It is the one thing that will last forever.

So Paul in the first verse of the next chapter says “Make love your aim.” It will inform your live together and mould you into the People of God. You can disagree about spiritual gifts, you can disagree about eating of food offered to idols, you can examine your practice of eating the Lord’s Supper. If you put love first in your congregational life, all these other issues can be worked out together. The language of I Corinthians 13 is poetic and beautiful. But for Paul, love is concrete – to be lived out in our daily living.

Jack Beal did a painting titled, “Hope, Faith and Love.” He has painted three characters to represent Faith, Hope and Love. In the painting there are two books. One on the stand on the table and the one being held by Faith (the character in the middle of the painting). The books seem important to the image. Faith is rooted, nurtured in human history and in the reflection of those who have searched for God in the past as well as in his own time. Faith appears to be totally concentrating. On his left, Hope, the younger woman of the two in the painting appears to be leaning close to Faith – probably suggesting the important relation with Faith. She holds a red rose – just opening in her right hand for Hope flowers in relation to Faith. Though Hope’s face is toward that of Faith, her gaze does not appear to rest exclusively upon him. Her eyes seem partially to rest on Charity. The more mature woman seated at right is Love. Having found faith and hope, Love gladly extends her gifts to one beyond the picture itself.

To me it is a contemporary extension of the words of Paul. Paul wanted the church in Corinth to live together in love. We know that is important. If a church spends its time putting out fires within the congregation, the love it is called to exhibit is not extended beyond itself.

Pilgrim is in the midst of change. We will have to work out our future in Paul’s attitude of love. We will need to be patient and kind. We cannot always insist on our own way. If we can demonstrate this attitude of love as self-giving, then we – even in the midst of our change will be like Love in the painting by Beal. We will reach out to those beyond ourselves with self-giving love. As we define our mission, as we speak of community, justice, witness – we must keep Love at our center. Love will lead us into that more excellent way of living together and with others.