

The Challenge of Love  
I Corinthians 13:1-8a  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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The words have been embroidered on many a pillow and wall hanging. They have been read at many a wedding. They are words we love to love. They are words about love.

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.”<sup>1</sup>

“Yes!” we say. That’s what love is. And that’s what we want to feel. That’s what we want to celebrate.

But, friends, if we are honest, we all know that love isn’t quite that easy. Love isn’t really the stuff of embroidered decorations and honeymoon moments. Love isn’t the stuff of hallmark cards and romantic movies. The reality is that love can be difficult; love takes a commitment to do what you don’t always feel.

And even though we don’t always like to talk about this reality, it is important to do so. And maybe it is most important to do so when we are blind to it...when love is easy, when it feels good. This isn’t about ruining the moment or bursting anyone’s bubble, but it is about being real, and also about reminding each other that even when it doesn’t feel like all is right with the world, even when it doesn’t feel easy, love is still possible.

Whenever I do a wedding, I say something like, “There will be days when it will be easier to be irritable than patient, easier to be resentful than kind. There will be days when it will be hard not to be envious of the other commitments in your spouse’s life, not to be rude when

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<sup>1</sup> I Corinthians 12:4-6, NRSV.

you are frustrated or disappointed. For love to really work, we must remember that it is not something that can be taken for granted, but something that must be cherished; love is not a warm, fuzzy feeling but a choice that people make each day.” I remind couples that sometimes it is the simple fact that they have the same address on their driver’s license that causes them to go home to each other at night.

This isn’t the fun stuff of love. This isn’t the stuff we like to talk about. But it is the reality. Love is work. It can be a challenge.

And this isn’t just true about romantic love between two people, but this is true of love in the broader community as well. After all, we remember that when Paul penned these words he wasn’t writing a wedding homily. Rather, these words are what comes next after what we heard last week from I Corinthians.

So, let’s pause again with those reminders about what we read here. The book we know as I Corinthians was a letter written from Paul to the Christian congregation at Corinth, a church he had established. The Christian community there was in the midst of conflicts with people taking sides based on who their favorite teacher was, and with people giving higher honor to those who exhibited a few certain spiritual gifts. There was division and discord in the congregation and Paul got word of this. So, what we read is his response, his encouragement and his calling them back to their better selves.

Last week we read chapter 12 in which Paul used the image of the body to talk about the value of each and every one, and to even lift up the way those we are less likely to recognize or offer special kudos to are in many ways actually more important.

After that conversation about spiritual gifts and the importance of all members in the body of Christ, Paul goes on with the words we heard this morning. And you can hear the connection. After all, he begins with reference to the spiritual gifts.

“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. 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. 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.”<sup>2</sup>

See we are most familiar with the part I referenced earlier – the list of things love is and is not – love is patient and kind, it is not rude or boastful or arrogant and so forth. And that’s the part that is easy to romanticize. But it is so important to remember where this shift to talking about love began.

While the people were fighting over whose gifts were more impressive and who made a bigger difference in the body of Christ...while they were trying to show off with their abilities and their faith, Paul called them back to the core. Paul reminded them that it didn’t matter what they did or how big they did it or even how impressed others were with it...if love was not at the heart of their actions, then it was nothing.

That’s how important love is to the life of the faith.

And, friends, that is a challenge. After all, we are all civilized enough human beings that we know we should smile and say hello to the stranger or even our enemy...but we also know how to do that without love. We know how to smile at another while bad mouthing them under our breath. We know how to look the part of the saint on the outside, but to do it out of

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<sup>2</sup> | Corinthians 12:1-3, NRSV.

responsibility or to impress someone or simply because our parents taught us that we should without letting those actions come from love.

And yet Paul makes it clear that even the most impressive acts – from having outward gifts that cause people to be amazed to giving away everything we have to even moving mountains because our faith is so strong – even the most impressive acts don't matter if love is not at their core.

So, what do we do with this? Because, after all, if we are honest – and it is okay for good Christian people to be honest about this – it is often a struggle. No matter how much we watch the example of Jesus. No matter how much we hear the teachings of the Bible. No matter how many times we say the word love in worship. The reality is that sometimes people just get on our nerves...sometimes people anger us and sometimes we should be angry with them...sometimes people don't seem worthy of love.

And in times such as these when people are so divided, loving even our friends, our family, our neighbors, our fellow church members can sometimes seem difficult. The additional instruction to love our enemies seems nearly impossible.

So, how do we really learn to love?

Well, here's the reality...there is no magic pill. There is no prayer we can pray that will suddenly turn us into people who experience sincere love for everyone we encounter.

But, perhaps, there are a few things we can do.

We can remind ourselves – and if you're like me, this will be a reminder you need more than once – that love isn't a warm, fuzzy feeling but a choice we make about how to act toward and even more than that, for, another. It isn't about liking someone or approving of their actions, but it is about ultimately willing and working for good for them.

And we can just keep trying to position ourselves for love. Because that's really what love is about. Even though we talk about it most often in interpersonal relationships, love is really about a position out of which we live. And so, if we find ways to root ourselves in God's love and to live from there, then we will find that it impact not just how we feel about our spouse or friend or even our enemy, but it will impact how we interact with individuals and with our communities, how we do business, how we live in this world, how we use our resources from our money to our power to our votes...it will impact everything.

And sometimes the best we can do is to just keep trying. In the movie *Finding Nemo*, the character Dory sings a simple little song learned in childhood that says, "Just keep swimming, swimming, swimming." For us, the calling is to just keep loving and the reminders we heard from Paul are important: when we love we choose patience and kindness; we let go of envy and arrogance; we don't demand our own way.

Whether we feel it or not, we are called as followers of Jesus to just keep loving, to act ourselves into believing, until finally after choosing it again and again, love becomes our reality. We are to take on the challenge and just keep loving until it becomes the position from which we live our lives.

May it be so.