

The Third Church Pulpit
Sermons from Third Presbyterian Church
Rochester, New York

What Love Looks Like

John Wilkinson

February 3, 2019



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Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

I Corinthians 13:1-13

Koine Greek, the language in which our New Testament was originally written, has three words for love. “Eros” is romantic love. “Philia” is brotherly or sisterly or neighborly love. “Agape” is self-giving, sacrificial love. All are important. All matter. Then and now. Here is what that has looked like in popular culture, or at least my narrow experience of it...

Somebody to Love. Can't Help Falling in Love. Crazy Little Thing Called Love. Sunshine of Your Love. Whole Lotta Love. I Just Called to Say I Love You. Love Me Two Times. I'll Have to Say I Love You in a Song. Loves Me Like a Rock. Love Her Madly. I'm All Out of Love (by the unforgettable Air Supply). Best of My Love. Silly Love Songs. The One I Love. I Think I Love You. I Can't Stop Loving You. Love Train. Addicted to Love. I Want to Know What Love Is. Love Will Keep Us Together. Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow? Loves Me Like a Rock. Higher Love.

A subsection exists where love is NOT such a great thing – You Give Love a Bad Name.

Love Is a Battlefield. Love Stinks. Love Hurts.

The Beatles represent in their own category. You've Got to Hide Your Love Away. Love Me Do. Can't Buy Me Love. And I Love Her.

When Maroon 5 performs, controversially to some, at halftime this afternoon, perhaps they will sing “She Will Be Loved.” Who knows? My alternate, fantasy Super Bowl has Ohio State defeating the New Orleans Saints on a last-minute field goal, with the Third Church Chancel Choir and Junior Choir performing at halftime, singing hymns and Bruce Springsteen covers.

You get the point. However it has been represented in popular culture over the years, over generations, grandly and granularly, we have done many things to and with love. When it comes to the three biblical understandings of love, it’s even worse. We have trivialized, marginalized, sentimentalized, neutralized love. Tina Turner asked what love had to do with it, calling it a second-hand emotion. She was right. Except it is not. Or it needn’t be.

God is love, we are told in the Bible. Love God, love neighbor, we are told. Jesus gives us a new commandment, to love one another.

And this. For the last few weeks, we have been working through chapter 12 of Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth. Paul is writing to a fledgling community, diverse, not sure what to believe or how to believe. They have even endured conflict as they have tried to establish norms and patterns of behavior. Paul insists that every one of them, each one of them, has been given gifts by the Spirit to use for the common good.

Paul then works through the extensive image of the church as a body, with all parts being equally valued and needed. He is portraying an alternate view, an alternate ethic, where all, not just some, matter, and where all, not just a few, have vital contributions to make to the church, which is, after all, the body of Christ.

He turns next to what that looks like. In some of the most familiar words in all of scripture, he writes to that little struggling church about love. It is “agape” love he considers here, self-giving, sacrificing love. We read these words at nearly every wedding I lead, which is

fine. They absolutely work in that context. But given this deeper understanding, we see two things – that if we read them at a wedding, this is about way more than the sentiment of the moment. This love is serious business, wonderful business, but serious business, for the long haul. And secondly, these words matter in all moments, weddings and marriages, yes, but every context where we are trying to figure out how we will live together, church, family, community, anywhere.

Paul understands that talk is cheap. He understands that in the culture, relationships can fail to go beyond the surface. He understands that people have skills and abilities, but that they are rarely understood as gifts from God. He understands. All of it, every word, every action, every connection, is nothing – nothing – without love.

Then these beautiful, profound, fierce, true words...about love. Love is patient. Love is kind. It is not envious, boastful, arrogant, rude. Think of every situation where those traits have won the day, and what an alternate scenario would look like, filled with kindness and patience, filled with the strength and power of love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things – that never ends. Never.

Karoline Lewis asks “Why is it that we find it so difficult to make what appears to be a rather obvious choice? A choice for love? What stands in our way? What is at stake for us that we are reluctant to admit or to say out loud?” Lewis writes: “... no matter where we go or who we are, there is and will be disagreement and division. The answer is not to erase, pretend it doesn’t exist, or think it will eventually go away, but to embrace more fully how to live into it, among it, and with it in love -- because God is love.”

Jan Richardson writes: “Loving is always risky, because we cannot enter into it without being changed. Altered. Transformed. Loving is never just about opening our heart. It is about

being willing to have our heart become larger as we make room for people and stories and experiences we never imagined holding. It is about being willing to have our heart become deeper as we move beyond the surface layers of our assumptions, prejudices, and habits in order to truly see and receive what—and who—is before us. It is about being willing to have our heart continually shattered and remade as we take in not only the brokenness of the world but also the beauty of it, the astounding wonder that will not allow us to remain the same.”

So Tina Turner was wrong, at least in that song. Love is NOT a second-hand emotion, or at least it needn't be. And the Beatles were right, or at least in that song. Love IS all you need, as long as that love is honest, authentic, open, risky, and that we who follow the God who is love are willing, even imperfectly, to risk having *our* brokenness transformed in order to heal the brokenness of the world.

That means, with Martin Luther King, Jr., seeking to exhibit strength in love by risking it all, for both black and white Americans, family, career, any semblance of popularity, life itself, with a risky vision and a risky tactic. King understood that whatever else this was about, it was about love.

Families understand that. I know we are all not married here, or all have children. But some of us are and do, and we know the strength of love on the other side of sentiment, when facing a crisis, a loss, a disappointment, a failing, and persevering, humbly, tentatively, again, imperfectly, but persevering in love, and love's strength.

Jesus understood it best. If God is love, then Jesus is love personified, love incarnate, flesh and blood love. We experience that in many ways. This morning we experience it simply, at a

table, with bread and cup, love broken, love poured out, in order that we may be strengthened to love.

That's what love looks like. Pure, unbounded, all-excelling love. And it never ends. It. Never. Ends. We are called to practice it, in big ways and small, and furthermore we are given the capacity and the gifts to do it, by God whose love for us is great. The greatest. Amen.

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