

“We Begin with Love”  
February 2, 2025  
Scripture: I Corinthians 13:1-13

I can't think of a more familiar passage from Paul's letters than that one from First Corinthians. How many of you have ever heard it read at a wedding? How many of you had it read at your wedding? Of course! It's all about love! Why wouldn't we want it read at our weddings? Ironically, though, Paul was not a big fan of marriage. He didn't conduct weddings, I'm sure, and sort of discouraged folks from bothering to get married. Paul believed Jesus' return was imminent and marriage was a distraction from focusing our attention on being ready to receive Christ. He does at one point say essentially, “If you just can't control yourself, then, fine, be married.”

So, if Paul wasn't real keen on marriage, then why this beautiful poem, this sweeping language about love? It can almost seem like an addition that's out of place if we think of it in the abstract. He's going along talking about how these people are meant to relate to one another in the community, how they're the body of Christ and each of them a member of the body, and suddenly he veers off on this tangent about love. But that's not really what's happening.

In the verse just before this passage, after going through the long analogy of the community as a body, Paul says this: “But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” So, here he's been instructing them on how to live together in harmony, how to value one another and appreciate one another's gifts, instead of forcing a hierarchy on themselves that creates division. And he says, “But there's more. There is a more excellent way of living together.” Love is what makes everything they do matter. And without it, no matter what they do, they're just wasting their time.

The love Paul is talking about isn't romantic love, like we often associate with marriage. The word in Greek is *agape*. It's a form of love that is selfless or sacrificial. It's the love that comes from God and is embodied in Jesus. Paul tells the community in Corinth that love, *agape*, is how they are to live with one another. Their gifts, their regard for one another, their future together all hinge on their capacity for love.

When I say, “We begin with love,” what I mean is everything we are, our whole life together as sisters and brothers in Christ, our status as citizens in the world, all begins with love. Love is meant to define us. And what does that look like in practical terms? “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.”

Can you imagine a world where everyone lived this way? Of course not! We know who we are. We know how attached we are to our resentments and boasts. We know how easily we snap when we feel attacked or insulted, kindness and patience don't always come easily to us. So, we can't imagine a world where we get it right, but maybe we can imagine a world where we are aware of our limitations and our shortcomings. We can imagine a world where our actions are

measured by the standard of love, where we can work every day to root ourselves in love and let it shape us.

In a world like that we can see beyond ourselves and how events affect us alone and appreciate the struggles others go through and how our actions might affect them. When we begin with love we no longer see those around us as objects whose value lies in what they can do for us, but as subjects, even siblings, whose value is inherent and calls us into relationship with them regardless of whatever superficial differences we might have. John Calvin, our theological grandparent, said the essence of the Christian life is denial of self. But self-denial isn't out of obedience to doctrine or an expression of worthlessness; self-denial is an act of love. Calvin writes, "Say that [the other] is unworthy of your making the smallest exertion on [their] account ; but the image of God, by which [they are] recommended to you, deserves your surrender of yourself and all that you possess... We should remember, that we must not reflect on the wickedness of [others], but contemplate the Divine image in them; which, concealing and obliterating their faults, by its beauty and dignity allures us to embrace them in the arms of our love."

Calvin could be very poetic at times. In spite of his own cultural limitations, his words still challenge us. What do we mean when we say all people are created in God's image? How do we live in ways that reflect that claim? We begin with love. Loving one another means setting aside our comfort and security and privilege so we can embrace others in their need and take their struggle on ourselves. When, for instance, undocumented immigrants are rounded up and placed in camps to languish, loving them means speaking out and advocating on their behalf. When people who are transgender are denied the healthcare needed to maintain their well-being, loving them means giving voice to their concerns and opposing efforts to erase them from society. When people of color point out acts of discrimination and microaggression that prevent them from access to tools for prosperity and advancement, loving them means listening to their stories and taking their grievances seriously, repenting of our society's sins and working toward reconciliation and reparation.

In a world where we begin with love, the pain of others becomes our own. It's a world where we put away our childish fixation on our own needs and become adults to one another, taking responsibility for one another. In a world where we begin with love, we can begin to see one another clearly, though we still look through a mirror dimly and always contend with some distortion, we can begin to see. What we can see is the very image of the One who calls us to love. When we begin with love, we become God's presence for one another; we are molded in the image of Christ who lives through us and in us.

For Paul, even though in this familiar passage he never mentions God or Christ, for him Christ crucified is the ultimate expression of love. And today, in this meal, we share in that love. At the table we are invited to become one with Christ and join him in loving the world. Today your life in Christ can begin, once more, with this meal. Your walk with Christ begins with love.

Amen