

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

One of my all-time favorite movies is Moulin Rouge- it is a fantastic love story and musical guided by one principle above all – which is stated and repeated several times in the film, including at the beginning by the main character, whose name is Christian, and who does indeed portray the Christian ideals about love (as well as those of his Bohemian friends). He sings, as he types the theme of the film with this line: “The greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love and to be loved in return.”

Christian is echoing the Bible and certainly sounds like he is quoting from St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians here. *The greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.* Paul says as much for almost an entire chapter and then then puts it this way, *“Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”*

Of course, we are prone to using the word “love” rather glibly in our vocabulary in our society, and so the word and concept of love can lose its power. We say, “I LOVE those shoes!” and “Don’t you love her hair?” My kids have a favorite response to my question, “Do you like it?” They will often chime in and say, “I don’t like it – I love it.” And we all giggle. But it goes to show though that English, unlike Greek, does not have a lot of words to convey the idea of love. Greek actually has four primary words that could all be translated as “love” in the English: philia, eros, agape, and storge. Philia is brotherly or sisterly or friendship love, eros is akin to romantic love, agape is godly unconditional love, and storge is related to affection.

In this rather famous passage about love in 1 Corinthians today, Paul uses the Greek word “agape” for love, which is the deepest, most all-encompassing form of love, an unconditional and Divinely inspired love filled with true, heartfelt charity towards others. In a book called “The Four Loves” by CS Lewis, Lewis examines the four Greek words for love and muses on their significance for us as Christians. He writes about agape love, the deepest of the 4 loves in this way:

“As...a garden will not survive without rain and sunshine, even these loves can only grow well, if at all, in (one's) heart when God's Charitable, selfless love [agape love] is allowed to enter, bless, and work the garden's promise and the gardener's toil into a fruitful enterprise.”

Agape love, then, is the kind of love that we cannot achieve completely on our own, we need God’s help, and it is godly love in that sense. I always remind couples of this fact when I perform weddings. I will always tell the couples that,

“...love is an act of the will to nurture the other person and always seek their personal and spiritual growth. This kind of love grows deeper and more intimate over time. It also requires effort and diligence. “Love is an action verb” as my professor used to say...it is not so much a feeling as it is an action and effort of the will. One must decide to love each and every day.... But this kind of love is not possible on our own. Agape love is only possible when we seek the source of love, which is God. God is your source for love first...and then you can love yourself and one another. Abide in God’s love so that you can abide in one another’s love.”

In 1 John 4:8 we read, *“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”* We should never gloss over that last phrase: God is love. God is love itself. God is love. The word for love being used here is also agape. God is agape love. With that in mind, my favorite way to read 1 Corinthians 13 is by simply substituting the word “love” for “God.” I know it’s taking liberties, but it’s a helpful point to make.

Listen to it read that way and see what new things jump out for you: “God is patient; God is kind; God is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. God does not insist on God’s own way; God is not irritable or resentful; God does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but God rejoices in the truth. God bears all things, believes all things, God hopes all things, God endures all things.”

And then how about turning it around another way, and asking ourselves where we fit in on the

love scale, with some self-examination and questions applied to the same text about love: “Am I patient; am I kind; am I envious or boastful or arrogant or rude? Do I insist on my own way; am I irritable or resentful; do I rejoice in wrongdoing; or do I rejoice in the truth”? Do I bear all things, believe all things, do I hope all things, am I willing to endure all things?”

ever learn is just to love – and be loved in return... with God’s help. Amen.

Most of us, if we’re honest, do not exactly measure up to the true test of love, but we are called upon to try...since love is the greatest of these. So – how do we become more filled with God’s love? One of the keys to loving others is comprehending and embracing the fact that God loves us – that God loves you and I so very much. So, lets it take one step farther, let’s personalize this text again: “God is patient with you; God is kind to you; God is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude towards you. God does not insist on God’s own way in regard to you; God is not irritable or resentful of you; God does not rejoice in your wrongdoing, but God rejoices in the truth in your life and heart. God bears all things with you, believes all things with you, God hopes all things for you, God endures all things with you.” This is Divine love - and notice that the text goes on to say, that *“now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now we know only in part; then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known.”* Understand that you are fully known to God. It’s not like God only knows a little bit about you and thinks you’re okay. God fully knows you; God knows it ALL... and God still loves you with agape love. In this life we know only dimly how much we are loved. But you are loved more than you think you are.

So, my friends, as we gather today for our annual meeting – we embrace God’s love for us as people and as a church and we hear the call to embrace one another in love. As Christians, as a church, and as people living in a very divided society – we have the calling and honor of modeling the Christian ideals of love – by being patient, kind, not insisting on our own way –and in becoming willing to bear all things with one another. And we go out into the world recognizing that the greatest thing we can