

Text: I Corinthians 13: 1-13
Title: Love in Context
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The First Reformed Church of Schenectady is a stately stone cathedral in a pre-revolutionary-war stockade. Surrounded by towering oak trees, homes from the 1700s on brick streets with slate sidewalks, and historical markers on every corner, it is magnificent and museum-like and it takes your breath away. Therefore, couples would constantly come to the church office and ask if they could get married there.

They wanted the beauty and the grandeur,
they wanted the tall steeple and the stained glass,
they wanted to walk the long aisle,
they wanted to feel something big and romantic and holy and...
they had no connection to the church.

By church policy it was the pastor's call. Meet the couple, decide if you want the extra-work, and maybe in the process help the young couple find a church home. Matrimonial evangelism. I was always too tender hearted and found their stories interesting. One of my favorites was a couple that met on line. He was in Hawaii, she was in New York, their first date was at LAX.

Most couples had very little faith tradition, but they knew they wanted to process to Pachelbel's Cannon and have something read from the Bible..... "Like.... like... like that passage about love."

The 13th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is a victim of its own beauty. It has been pulled out and plopped down in weddings, plastered on greeting cards, and painted in misty water-colored memories. Like a leaf floating and falling in the wind this text has often been left adrift. It is all beauty but no branch, all sentiment but no context.

So, while it is sublime,
and there may be no more beautiful prose about love in all of literature,
and without souring its syrup,
it might be helpful to put it in context.

The church in Corinth was a mess. One historian describes it as a culture war with no less than 15 distinguishable problems that Paul addresses in this letter. They were splintered by divisions. There was quarrelling, jealousy, and moral failing. Some abused their new freedoms. Some were overly exuberant and showy in their spiritual fervor. A meal that should have been a symbol of generosity and community was marred by gluttony and selfishness. There was disagreement about resurrection and debate about worship. Etcetera, etcetera. In short, the church in Corinth was beautiful and broken, flawed and fallen, just like every other church.

And, to that community Paul writes:

You belong to God in Christ.

You are gifted for the common good.

You are the Body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.

But, if you're comparing your place, or jealous of another's, or you think it's about the gifts, then you're missing the heart of it, you're missing what really matters. Let me show you a better way...

If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

Eugene Peterson – The Message

With that introduction, Paul defines the most excellent way, the way of love. It's not very sexy, has little to do with romance, and is nothing that you fall in and fall out of. But, love is practical and substantive and sacrificial. As John Buchanan puts it:

Paul draws on a word and a concept from Greek literature, agape – an attitude of self-giving, a way of relating that regards the needs of the other...It doesn't have much to do with feelings at all. It has a lot to do with how people relate to one another in community, which means it is primarily a social and political word.

Love is social and political.

Now, that may not be what the bride and groom had in mind, but for our life together, for our life with God, for our life in this world love is social and political....

Annette Smith worked as a janitor at Roseland Christian Ministries. She was 6' 4"', skinny as a rail, and over the years her back curled forward until she was looking at the ground. In order to see you she had to pick up her head. Annette had a developmentally disabled son, Lloyd, who was also long and lanky and while he could be hard headed and persistent there wasn't a mean bone in his body. Most days he tagged along with his mom to help out at the Center.

When Annette was put into a nursing home Lloyd was left to manage their house. His sweet disposition made him a welcoming doormat for stragglers and squatters. And a few weeks ago, someone in that house beat Lloyd to death.

A few days ago, about 25 friends from Roseland gathered in a room at the Annette's nursing home to celebrate Lloyd's life and grieve his loss. It's the only way that his passing will be marked.

In some ways it was a typical funeral: songs were song, stories were told, scripture was read, and a fine sermon was spoken. There were tears and laughter, heartbreak and encouragement...

But, what I can't shake is how that room was thick with love. People with better than thirty years of history: recovering crack-whores, men with all manner of mental health issues, those who live in the shadows and on the margins, addicts and alcoholics, the poor and the passed over ~ they all had stories of ways in which they stood with and stood for Lloyd. I'm hard pressed to name anyone in that room who hasn't lost a loved one to violence and yet they prayed for the perpetrators. Annette is bed-bound and everyone looked for ways in which they could make her more comfortable and better cared for.

Few in this world paid any attention to this little gathering. You couldn't scrap together enough money in that room to buy a meal. They're theologically suspect and morally compromised. None are movers and shakers, none are well heeled or well educated. And yet, there was a love present that was concrete and practical and relational and sustained; and in that there was a glimpse of the Body of Christ. You'd be hard pressed to find a more rag-tag gathering and yet love had a context. Love wasn't an untethered ideal it was embodied in community. It was a picture of an alternative kingdom.

Dear friends,....

If we have well-crafted liturgies and sermons brimming with existential angst but have not love...

If we sing like angels with piano, cello, flute, mandolin, organ, cajón, violin, and guitar but have not love...

If we pay all our denominational ministry shares and give our finest to the poor but have not love...

If we are theologically astute, offering the best of the reformed tradition, but have not love...

If we are dynamic of faith, broad of mind, and culturally engaged but have not love...

If we get it all right but have not love...

You get the point.

To the Body of Christ (and each one of you are a part of it) Paul writes that while all sorts of other things are important, and while faith and hope remain, the greatest gift, the most excellent way, the highest goal, what finally matters, that which is eternal, is love.

Gil Bowen gets at it this way:

Love is the bedrock reality beneath all the other realities of this world, love is the power that sustains the universe and each one of us. Love is God, and when we, under the impress of his love, stretch ourselves beyond ourselves to love as he did, even to the point of the cross, we participate in that which is forever, and from which nothing in this life ever separates us. Love never ends. That is the promise, that in the end there will be love.

Now. To the church in Corinth,
to newlyweds in Schenectady,
to a nursing home in south Chicago,
to our little corner,
the invitation is the same.
Seek the way of love.

And that means exercising patience, showing kindness, not getting caught up in comparison with others, and not getting up on our high horse. It means honoring others, putting their needs before your own, and restraining anger. To love is to quit keeping track of the ways in which we've been wronged. Love revels in the truth, protects the weak, trusts the way of God, keeps hope alive, and always holds out until the end when there will be love. Love wins.

Of course, I don't know a soul who can live into that high calling. But the interpretive lens for I Corinthians 13 is Jesus. If you want to see the embodiment of our text look to Jesus ~ including his death on a cross and the triumph of his resurrection. Therein lies the social and political nature of love.

So, dear friends, come to the table, this glimpse of love.
For here we are reminded:

You belong to God in Christ.
You are gifted for the common good.
You are the Body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.
You are loved to embody love until love wins.

Amen.