

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 on September 25, 2016 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: 1 Corinthians—a 21st Century Church
Today's Focus: Hero or Zero

Theme: Love can't be, "Look at me!"

In the name of Jesus who said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

Friends, today we're going to have a conversation about love. How do you feel about that? I imagine right now some of you are inwardly groaning, "Again?" Some of you might be thinking, "You better make sure you practice what you preach." Some of you might even be thinking, "But we're not the ones who need to talk about love. It's the people out there. Haven't you been watching the news? Haven't you seen what's been going in in Sherman Park, in Tulsa, in Charlotte? Haven't you been reading all the hate being shared out there in on Twitter and social media? They people out there need to hear about love. They should be the ones sitting here in church listening to a sermon. Oh...and maybe that guy sitting over there right now. Yeah, him too. And maybe my spouse sitting next me, that wouldn't hurt. But me, I'm ok. I'm good."

Well you know what friends? I think that's what the Corinthians thought too. And it's why the Apostle Paul pauses in the middle of chapters 12 and 14 of his letter to write, guess what? Chapter 13 (What an insight, huh?). Sandwiched in between two chapters about spiritual gifts, like peanut butter and jelly holding together two pieces of bread, Paul writes a chapter about love.

Maybe this sounds familiar to already because you often hear 1 Corinthians 13 at weddings. And for good reason. It's one of my favorite passages for weddings actually. "Love is patient. Love is kind..." But you know what? It wasn't written specifically for a wedding. It was written to help Christians in a church understand how they were failing in their use of spiritual gifts, how they were acting selfishly in their relationships with each other, and to show them a far better way of being the people Jesus redeemed them to be. Here's what Paul says,

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

You ever have anyone crash cymbals next to your head and expect you to tolerate it? That would be obnoxious and jarring, right? Or consider this. We've got a blender in our kitchen. I'm talking about one of these Ninja blenders that when you throw some ice cubes in there to make a smoothie and you turn it on, it sounds like a fighter jet is taking off as it's crushing those ice cubes. You know what I'm talking about? Any of you have a blender like that? It's fantastic. But you ever try and have a meaningful conversation when the blender's on? Forget it. Or can you imagine

trying to talk in the kitchen about something important that you really care about, like “Honey, we’ve got to talk” only to have your spouse turn on the blender, look at you, and shout, “What!? I can’t hear you. You talking to me!?”

Paul’s saying that’s how you or I can come across when genuine love doesn’t motivate our words or our actions. He’s saying this is how we can sometimes come across when all we want to talk about is ourselves or we act like we’re looking for attention, or we act like our pride is wounded because we aren’t getting what we want and other people aren’t accommodating our wishes. He’s saying this is how we Christians in the church can sometimes come across to the world when I act as if I’ve got it all perfectly figured out, and I’ve got all the answers, and I’m going to tell you that I’m right and I’m going to quickly critique you where you’re wrong and where everybody else is wrong...just don’t really expect me to patiently listen to you or make any effort to be part of any kind of actual solution.

See friends, here’s the thing, take this to heart. Paul’s saying even if you’re right (and right about important things even), unless your rightness comes from a heart of love where you care about other people and you are motivated to act unselfishly for another person’s wellbeing over your own, it’s worthless. In fact, take it to the extreme. Paul says about himself, **³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.**

So how important is the topic of love? It’s everything, isn’t it? Remember what was going on in Corinth and why Paul brings this up here. Some people were all hung up on flashy spiritual gifts that seemed outwardly impressive like speaking in tongues. Those people started acting like somewhere was wrong with you if you didn’t have gifts like they did and they downplayed the gifts of others as if they were less special or important. Those who had these flashy gifts walked around with a little extra spiritual swagger which sinfully made others feel like second class Christians who were left to question whether they were maybe even Christians at all. How loveless! Friends, that’s why love can’t be, “Look at me!”

Think about it in a marriage. How well does it work if you’re in competition with your spouse about who is right and who needs to change but neither one genuinely seeks to understand the other or have empathy for their spouse’s feeling and stubbornly insists that they don’t have to change anything about themselves? How well does it work if each person wishes the other would accommodate their needs but isn’t willing to take the first step or stubbornly won’t even accept it when the other makes the effort to show love first? How well does it work if your goal isn’t to gain mutual understanding but simply to win another argument? Because here’s the thing, if you’re married, and you’re in conflict and you’re not going to compromise and so you’re going to hold out until you win, you know has happened? Even if you’re right...you both lose. You cannot compete in a relationship and come out on top. It’s the same way in a church. If you try to win by being right or by comparing yourself to others, the church loses. And the worst part? The world misses out on seeing Jesus. That’s why love can’t be, “Look at me!”

So Paul teaches us about love and what it is supposed to look like. Please listen carefully: ⁴ **Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.** ⁵ **It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered** [aka calm and self-controlled, we Christians should not be quickly provoked or prone to retaliating], **it keeps no record of wrongs.** [In other words when you say that everything's good, I forgive you, then you can't go back and keep bringing up things from the past. I remember this put quite memorably in a marriage counseling situation once when I heard a pastor say, "When you bury the hatchet with forgiveness, you can't leave the handle sticking out of the ground so that you can easily grab it at any time to fling at each other again.] ⁶ **Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.** ⁷ **It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.** [So love is always trying to understand, always trying assuming the best about somebody, putting the best construction on a situation, taking another person's words and actions in the kindest possible way], ⁸ **Love never fails.**

Ok, so how well do these descriptions of true love match up with you? Were you thinking about this as you heard me read them? Or were you thinking about someone else you hoped was listening instead? See that just shows us how selfish, arrogant, and unloving we can be, doesn't it?

Love can't be, "Look at me!" Because when I hear these words about love and I try to find myself in them, what do I really see...if I'm honest? I haven't loved like that. Have you? I know I haven't always been patient, always been kind, have you? These words then first of all are like a mirror that reveals our flaws, our failures to love. And if we're honest...we're all far less loving, less kind, and less forgiving than we would like anyone else here to know. That's why love can't be, "Look at me!" Because you and I haven't loved like this. There is, in truth, only one who has.

His name? Jesus. He is the only One who loved us so flawlessly that these words of 1 Corinthians 13 always fit him perfectly. Jesus, God's Son, our Savior, is the only one who loved like this—unconditionally, sacrificially, unselfishly, completely, thoroughly, with empathy. He always protected. He always trusted. He always hoped. He always persevered. His love never failed. He put our best interests ahead of his own. All the time. His love persevered all the way to the cross where he paid our sin debt, in full. Where he won forgiveness for every moral fault and personal flaw of ours so that God himself has now thrown away the record of our wrongs (so then why would we ever keep them close at hand to hold against each other?) Jesus has reconciled us to God and to each other so that we are no longer enemies of God but his friends, yes even members of his family now through holy baptism. And by his resurrection from the dead on Easter, Jesus has opened up the doors of heaven where we will all stand one day in his presence in paradise where we will see know and see this all with perfect clarity and peace. Paul fast forwards us to that day,

But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ **For we know in part and we prophesy in part,** ¹⁰ **but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.** ¹¹ **When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.**

I think Paul's saying, "Some of you are spiritual toddlers and eventually it's time to grow up." Because we all know toddlers. They can be very cute and fun. The best. Lots of energy. Lots of fun to hang out with. But at the same time incredibly self-centered. Toddlers can be petty and become pouty in seconds. And so when everything is going well, you just kind of go, "I wonder how long it's going to be before the tantrum begins." Like kids playing on the trampoline. This past week one day there were three toddlers on the trampoline in our backyard. As a parent you're always just kind of thinking, "Ok how long...yep there it goes...someone didn't get their way and now there are tears and screaming going on." Imagine a church full of people or a volunteer team full of people who are acting like toddlers. And here Paul's admitting, I was like this too. I needed to grow up. I needed to put childish ways of acting behind me.

And if you're wondering how to do that, Paul is showing the way today. It's to recognize that love can't be, "Look at me!" It's "Look at him! Look at Jesus." He's the only one who can say, "Look at me!" Who can say, "I will take your sin. In exchange I will give you God's forgiveness. I will take your guilt. I will give you my glory. I will take your shame. I will show you true love. And when you come to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion I will prove it once again, my body and blood, the ultimate price, paid for you. I gained nothing so that you can have everything."

¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Why is love the greatest? I think because God is love and when are we most like God? Not when we trust. Not when we hope. But when we love—when we love our enemies, when we love our neighbors and our communities, when we love our family, when we love our spouse in the way that God has loved us in Christ. Another way to look at it is like this. Love is the fruit of faith. Faith, hope, and love. A couple years ago we planted a peach tree. We planted it for its fruit. It took four years, but this year we enjoyed eating juicy peaches this summer. Love is like this fruit. The roots of our faith in Jesus Christ produce the fruits of our love.

Pastor Bill showed love to me this week by using his gift of running with me. We had agreed to run together on Thursday morning but when I saw it was raining I texted him to say I was going to opt out. But he texted back and said, "How about I run to your house, then we can run for about 30 minutes back to your house, and I'll run home from there." So I agreed because what was Bill saying is, "Ben, I will meet you where you're at." Then when we started running together it became clear after a while that we'd have to go at a slower pace than he is used to by himself but that was ok. Without frustration he accommodated my pace. He willingly came alongside me instead of leaving me in the dust. But at the same time he kept just a bit ahead so as to push me, to bring out the best in me. So he met me where I was at, he accommodated me in my running weakness, and we ran alongside each other together heading eventually towards home. How can you show love to someone like that this week, maybe even helping them towards their heavenly home? Amen.