

“Already! But Not Yet!!”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for January 31<sup>st</sup> 2016 (Fourth Sunday after Epiphany)  
by Foster Freed

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13

There are, I think, few scripture passages as familiar as the 13 verses that comprise the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. Presumably the Lord’s Prayer and perhaps the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm are somewhat more familiar than 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13; and quite possibly John 3: 6 and the opening words of Genesis are equally familiar. Beyond that...well, beyond that Paul’s great ode to love must certainly count as the most familiar passage Paul ever wrote, and one of the most familiar to be found anywhere in our Bible, Testaments Old and New alike!

As you can imagine, of course, part of the challenge of preaching on such a passage is directly related to the fact that it is so terribly familiar. While it would be something of an overstatement, in this particular instance, to claim that familiarity breeds contempt, it’s certainly no exaggeration to suggest that familiarity does breed familiarity! Such familiarity can most certainly pose a challenge when we are trying to hear a word from scripture with fresh ears and an open heart. Nor, I hasten to add...

...nor is it a matter of indifference that the theme of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 focuses upon that most easily clichéd of four-letter words, namely “love”. On the one hand, the English word love far too often provides a ready cover for a multitude of sins! On the other hand, the fact that the Christian church—and liberal Protestant faith-movements in particular—have placed such emphasis upon the life-of-love, makes it all too easy to find oneself simultaneously bogged down both in truisms and in a wee bit of cynicism, as those who know how easily love congeals into something else may well want to wash their hands of the whole business. However!

I think there is a pretty strong case to be made that we have an opportunity, this morning, to perhaps see this text from another angle...to hear this text in a new key...precisely because we presently encounter the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians having spent two weeks looking at its immediate predecessor (the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians) and in anticipation that we will spend next Sunday, considering that which follows (the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians). In other words, this morning we get to hear this text in its original context as opposed to the two contexts in which we are nowadays most likely to hear 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13. And yes: in case you have been sleeping under a rock these past 20 or 30 years, let me remind you what those two contexts are to which I refer.

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Probably the likeliest context within which we are liable to hear 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 read—at any rate a heavily edited version of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 read—is a Christian wedding ceremony. The focus, when the passage is used at a wedding, tends to be on the section that lays out the practical dimensions of love: *love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude*. For my money that's a perfect passage to read at the start to a marriage, reminding the soon-to-be-wed pair that passion may ebb and flow, but that love will be required throughout their union. And you know: I occasionally meet a clergyman who insists that 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 is the wrong passage to read at a wedding since everyone there knows perfectly well (chuckle, chuckle) that the sort of love Paul is talking about here is not the sort of love the couple has in mind on their day of their wedding. May God spare us from such idiots! Paul's message about the nitty-gritty face of love, against the backdrop of a world that can challenge love at every turn, is precisely what we all need to hear in just about every one of life's contexts, including those moments of joy where two lovers are privileged to say, "I do"!

As for the other context in which we are likeliest to hear these words read, my experience tells me that other context is at a funeral. This appears to be a recent development, which doesn't make it inappropriate. After all, funerals are a time not only for expressing gratitude for a particular life, but also a time for reminding ourselves of those things in life that truly matter, those things in life that truly abide. Love, perhaps more than any other quality, helps us to define such things, and thereby provides a perfect touchstone against which any of us will need to weigh our own course through life. And yes: whatever else Paul's ode to love in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 has the power to do, it most certainly does have the power to challenge that noxious claim, the one that posits that "he who dies with the most toys wins!" God forbid! But now here's the thing.

While it may well be true that weddings and funerals are the occasions upon which you and I are likeliest to hear these words from Paul, neither weddings nor funerals are what Paul had in mind when he sat down to compose this portion of his first letter to the Christians at Corinth. No! As we have been discovering the past few weeks, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 is part of a larger conversation in which Paul is engaged, seeking to address what he has come to regard as a problematic way in which spiritual gifts are regarded and being used within the Corinthian Church. Thinking back to the past two weeks, you will recall that the heart of the problem appears to have been ecstatic speech, speaking in tongues: an experience Paul's friends in Corinth found so riveting that it appeared to be in danger of overshadowing all of the other gifts God was pouring into the Corinthian Church. And so Paul sets out in this chapter...

...and here I'm taking exception to the views of a small handful of scholars who claim that the love chapter doesn't really belong here, but was placed here by a later editor, a perspective that simply makes no sense to me...

...Paul sets out in this chapter to lay out one further objection he has to the exclusive focus some members of the Corinthian Church were placing upon the gift of tongues. And so at the start of the chapter...

...well, at the start of the chapter, Paul simply tells them that love is more basic than any of the other gifts they might ever hope to cultivate, and that all of those other gifts are worth cultivating only if they are leavened by love.

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,<sup>1</sup> but do not have love, I gain nothing.* Nothing fancy here in this first step; Paul simply names three increasingly laudatory ways in which one can practice one's faith—tongues, prophecy, sacrificial self-giving—and insists that each one is null and void without love. There's not a whole lot of room for ambiguity in Paul's opening salvo.

What follows next is the section we often hear at weddings: the part of the chapter in which Paul waxes practical, spelling out the contours of love. *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; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* And I think at the heart...

...at the heart of those words, is the reminder (the very reminder we try to give couples on the day they wed) that there is an inescapably mundane side to love: an each day/every day, one blessed thing after another, quality to a life of love that can land us in places that are terribly unsexy, and notably lacking in anything that even vaguely smacks of ecstasy. Notice also how the final item on that shopping list speaks of love as "enduring" all things, which points to the fact that beyond the fact that love can sometimes involve us in very ordinary things, almost inevitably entails suffering. Paul's point seems clear: those who want the gifts of God without a willingness to embrace the mundane and yes, at times, to embrace suffering, don't really want the gifts of God at all! That too seems pretty plain and pretty clear.

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It's the final part of this chapter that can sometimes seem a little ill tailored to the overall argument Paul is attempting to make here. In the final portion, he begins with the affirmation that *love never ends* and from there launches into a

poetic celebration of the eternity of God's love. Indeed, so rich and majestic is the love we will one day experience, Paul insists that we presently have only a tiny comprehension of what love really and truly entails. *For now we see in a mirror dimly*, he writes, *but then we will see face to face*: words that are both lovely and memorable, but words which may or may not add to the larger point Paul is trying to make about the gifts of God. But now here's the thing.

I believe that the Christians in Corinth...

...recall just how brand-spanking new the Christian movement was when Paul wrote this letter; if you've ever known someone who has just become a Christian you may get a sense of where I'm going here...

...I think the Christians in Corinth...especially those who had been gifted with ecstatic speech...were developing a theology in which they saw themselves as so caught up in heavenly things that they were convinced that—for all intents and purposes—they were already enjoying heaven! God had blessed them...and their job assignment was to enjoy the blessing! God had set the table...and their job was to dive in and dine! God had opened the door to ecstasy, and their job was to walk right in and sit right down. And Paul, in effect, is saying: "Slow down, kids! You're getting way ahead of yourselves. Yes, we've tasted the things of God **already!** But we're **not there yet.**" Or as Paul so beautifully puts it in the letter: *For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face*. We **already** see something: that can't be denied because I've seen it too! But we're **not there yet** because when we are there we'll see face to face...and we'll know the things of God, as God already knows us. Slow down! Slow down! Slow down not only to smell the roses...but slow down to learn and to put into practice the things that really matter...the things of love!

And, you know: I'm struck by the fact...struck by the fact that the problem Paul is having here is kind of the opposite problem we tend to have. Our fear is that the picture of heaven ahead is so alluring, that people won't bother to work to make this world better: we call that "pie-in-the-sky" theology. But in Corinth, it was the other way around: they thought they already had it so good, that not only did they invest no energy in that which was still to come, but they saw no need to invest time or energy in the mundane things, because the party had already begun and they were not gonna do anything that might cause them to miss out on the fun. Needless to say: what both of those traps have in common, is that they provide a good rationale for avoiding the heavy lifting...the heavy lifting that Paul...and we...continue to speak of as love, as a life lived in and for love!

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Permit me a final thought.

I think it's fair to claim that 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 provides us with the most comprehensive exposition of the way of love found anywhere in the

Bible...perhaps found anywhere, in such condensed form, in all world literature. Paul here tells us first that love is important...then provides us with some of the building blocks of love...and finally directs our gaze toward the eternity of love, proclaiming that love will abide forever. Nevertheless!

Seems to me...seems to me that the one thing Paul fails to do in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13, is to explain just why it is that love is so important: in other words, he never really gets around to explaining what it is that love seeks to accomplish, what it is that love seeks to achieve. Read on its own, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 never even touches on that most important of themes, namely: why does love matter? What is love's purpose? What is love's goal? We could read this chapter from here to eternity, and we'd be none the wiser on those rather essential questions. The thing being...

Well: the thing being that Paul does, I believe, get around to answering that set of questions in the very next chapter, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 14. And the answer he provides is ever so important....urgently important to any community that wishes to call itself disciples, followers of Jesus. In short, that's a question—and Paul's answer is an answer—we dare not shirk. However!

If you wish to wrestle with that question, and with Paul's answer to that question, you'll just have to come back next Sunday!

Amen!