

What's Love Got To Do With It?
1 Corinthians 13 Tim Dickau June 25th, 2017

In a moment, I'm going to invite our three guests up so that I can interview them about our subject this morning. Today we are coming to the end of our series on developing Christ-like character. We picked this time of year to talk about character because as pastors, we know we can be kind of grumpy and tired out by this time of year -- well, Joy and Jake especially -- my problem is that I already had a week holiday so I don't have a good excuse. Now we hope that you are benefitting too.

Now from the beginning of this series, we have noted how this call to develop character can seem out of place, almost irrelevant in a culture where seemingly all that matters is getting what we want or making it big, no matter how you get there. Two years ago, David Brooks, the New York journalist and author, sounded the alarm bells in his best-selling book "The Road to Character" arguing that this disregard for character is producing shallow people and a unkind society. Character matters. Not just to who you are becoming but to what kind of society we become.

Today, we are wrapping up our Easter/Pentecost series on developing Christ-like character by talking about love. We kept this theme of love to the end of this series because there is a sense in which love holds, undergirds or shapes all of these character traits we have been seeking to foster. Paul says as much at the beginning of this poem in 1 Corinthians 13 that we want to explore today. At the beginning of that chapter Paul names these valuable actions that build up others -- speaking in tongues, prophecy and seeking justice for the poor -- but says if you do all these things but lack love, it all adds up to very little. To put it another way, as churches we might foster a vital charismatic expression of faith, or deep cultural engagement and understanding, or a strong commitment to solidarity with the poor and social justice but if we don't have love, Paul argues, we are just adding to the noise we already have too much of in the world. Love is what shapes these actions making them worthwhile and transforming. So all these character traits we've been talking about such as humility and contentment and denying oneself are all given the right color or hue by love. Without love, our reflection of the divine image will be awfully dull.

The Look of Love

What does love look like when it is brightly colored? In the second part of this three-part poem, Paul offers a very concrete description of love, one that differs from our very fluffy, jelly-fish like notions of love that can mean almost anything or nothing. Listen again to that description. "Love is patient -- right there this knocks out notions of love that come and go like the sun in January. I think Chris has something more to say about this in a moment.. Next, love is kind - Canadian writer Ronald Rolheiser describes a sure sign of the Spirit's presence is a mellow heart- an openness to God and others, a kindness. Next, love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.⁵ It does not dishonor others -- a sure sign that love is being lost is when we get into the habit of skewering others -- love is not self-seeking -- some days it's hard to fathom living otherwise in a consumer society; we are so tuned to think about ourselves; Love is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs -- which is one secret to lasting households and marriages.⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth -- sometimes we pit love against truth. They belong together. A genuine love aims for what is true and good. -- Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

What I want to notice here is how love is linked to *other* actions, *other* practices. In a sense, love is a by-product of these other actions. Actions that must be repeated time and time again. During this entire series, we have come back to this notion of practice, repetition, habit-forming behaviours. In that sense, your character is something that develops over a "thousand small decisions". You become a person who loves by taking up these practices of kindness, humility, forgiveness, rejoicing in and pursuing what is true, persevering in struggle, again and again. Do these again and again and God will grow love in you. I've seen it time and again here.

On January 15, 2009, Chelsey Sullenberger, who was the main pilot of US Airways Flight 1549, was at the center of a crisis. When the plane he was piloting hit a large flock of Canadian geese shortly after taking off from Laganardia Airport, it lost both engines. Quickly determining he would be unable to reach any airport -- a decision that was later confirmed in the investigation that followed -- Sully made a quickly made decision to land the plane on the Hudson river. The thing is that without either engine, he landed the plane largely by feel, a feel that came from hundreds of previous landings. Those hundreds of practice landings resulted in passing the tough test in front of him in a moment of crisis.

While our character is tested in moments of crises and struggle, it is developed in those thousand small decisions leading up to those moments. Are you making those small decisions towards love each day?

What else becomes clear in this section is that we don't become loving on our own. We becoming loving in relationship with others. Indeed, it's when we find it hard to love that we have this great opportunity to put these practices Paul names into action. Who needs to be patient when when all is well. Who needs to forgive when you aren't wronged? Who needs to persevere when life is humming along? No, it's when we rub up against differences that these actions are most called for. Love develops amidst the struggle of community. Of course when we reach that point, love can seem darn near impossible. And when we reach that point where staying seems impossible, then, our modernist illusions that we can live without God also vanish quicker than Vancouver residents on July 1st.

So one of one of the key re-orientations we need if we are to grow in love, and if we are to form **lasting** community or family is to view disagreement and conflict as the beginning, not the end, of love's education. When we come to the end of ourselves, we are ready to receive divine love. Are you holding that orientation to your disagreements and conflicts? Are you entering into love's education and formation?

One of the striking features of this letter to the Corinthians is how messed up they are. There is no shortage of disagreements, conflicts, signs of brokenness. Paul names division, rivalry, unequal treatment of rich and poor, sexual oppression. Yet in this very clumsy community, Paul offers one of the most magnificent visions of the church as the expression of Christ's body in the world in chapter 12, and one of the most vibrant pictures of the church as the site of the Spirit's gifting in worship and adoration of the creator God in chapter 14. Paul has high hopes for what the Spirit of God does in a Christ-following community. He believes that God **will** form us into a people of love. This is what God's Spirit is doing. The question for us is whether we will keep in step with the Spirit.

A privilege to learn from some folks who have been formed in relationships and communities of love. And now I want to invite our friends up here to learn from their own experience about being formed into a people who love well.

Sally and Chris both in communities with a lot of similarities to ours. Barbara a long time friend and resource for our community.

Sally, you have been a member, pastor and mentor of many at Reba community and church in Chicago for many years: What are one or two practices that have been integral for developing a community shaped by love?

Chris is a writer and a member of Englewood church in Indianapolis. Chris and I are part of a co-hort together exploring the future of Christian community in North America. His book *slow church* is one that has garnered a lot of interest. He is writing a book on conversation right now and has explored other communities practice of conversation. He's checking out us this weekend to - so if you have something to say about conversation, join his group for lunch. What are some ways that you have seen love expressed in and through conversations, especially difficult conversations?

Barbara is a friend to many in our community and a former professor at Carey who developed a program in spiritual formation that a number of folks in our church have taken. The vision of the church is to receive and extend the welcome and love of God. But sometimes the first part of that vision is the hardest. What are some of the key blockages to receiving love from God in our day and age?

In closing, I want to look at the last section of this poem in 1 Corinthians 13. In the last part of this poem, Paul talk about the enduring power of love. Actually, he speaks of three virtues for us to grow in, all of which point towards the future -- faith, hope and love. And yet the greatest of these, he says, is love. Why is love the greatest? Well it has to do with what will happen when God makes all creation new. Notice what Paul writes here. We know in part now, he says, but when Christ makes all things new, we will know fully and be fully known. We understand in part, but when heaven comes to earth, we will understand all things and make sense of all things. To put it another way, faith and hope will be realized. As one poet put it, faith will vanish into sight, Hope will be emptied in delight, and love will shine ever more bright. Love will endure forever.

For Paul then, love is not our duty; love is our destiny. Love is our destiny. When we are made complete, love will be in all and for all. Love will flood all of creation. Which is why Paul calls us to be formed in love now. For if love really is our destiny, why not live into the future in the present? Why not be changed now into what we will one day fully become?

illustration - two brother in laws with early onset Alzheimer's both in their late 50's. Our language around dementia reflects these fears. He's losing it. He's not himself.

But what if our essential self is more than on our thoughts, cognition? What if love is who we truly are? What if our memory is held by others in community, and by ultimately by God? If it is, then love is what remains.

I find great assurance in knowing that love is our destiny. It means that in all my self-seeking, in all my temptations to pull away or to be unkind, in all my struggle to persevere, in all the ways I choose not to love,, when I repent, when I make that small decision to turn again to the way of Christ, to God, I know I am moving again towards my future with God, my future in love. In that small decision to love, I turn to face the right direction once more. And I can go again.

Hear the good news this morning: Love is your destiny. The Spirit is forming you in Christ through those thousand small decisions you make. Remember this: it only takes one small decision towards love for Christ to meet you again on the road to your future..

What small decision are you being called to make today to move towards your future in love? On this weekend of reviewing our life together as a community, what small decisions are we being called to make together to move us towards our future in love?

Let's take a moment to listen to the Spirit's prompting now. Let's listen in silence. What small decision are you being called to make today to move towards your future in love?. What small decision are we being called to make together to move us towards our future in love?

Communion table.

"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. Which is why we would lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

I invite you to commit yourselves to that small decision you or we are being called to this morning to move again towards the path of love.