

Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

February 3, 2019

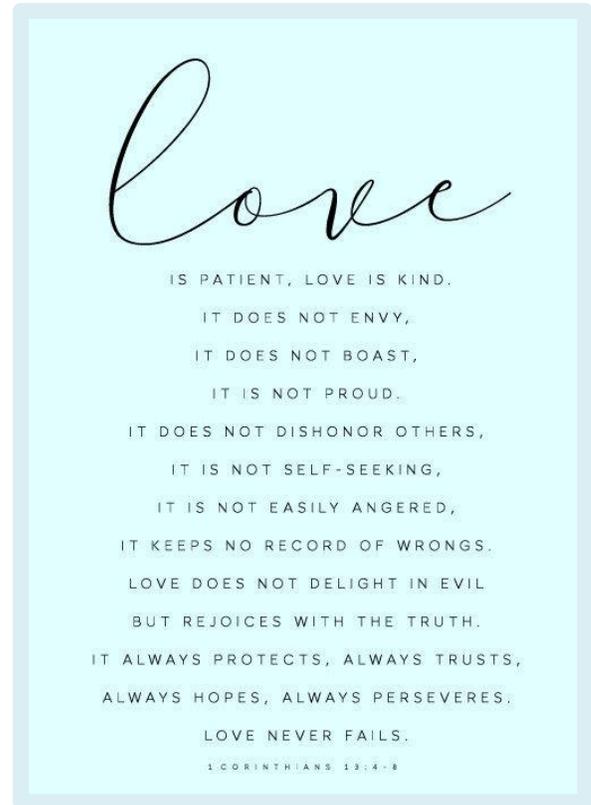
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## Love Actually *Is* All Around

**Jeremiah 1:4-10**

**1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13**

The second reading today is among the most beautiful and best remembered chapters in the scriptures. Many people say 1 Corinthians 13 is their favorite chapter in the New Testament. It follows Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts in chapter 12. The Apostle leaves absolutely no doubt which spiritual gift he thinks is the most important. It's love. "Love, love, love...[singing] All you need is love." Apologies to Lennon and McCartney!



This is not a sugar-coated, Valentine's Day love.

This love is durable, resilient and resolute.

This is love that endures. Hear again from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

*But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a more excellent way. 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, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*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.*

*Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.*

*When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

A lot of people think that former President Jimmy Carter founded Habitat for Humanity. He didn't; actually it was biblical scholar and Georgia pecan farmer Clarence Jordan. With the vision of Jordan and the business sense of Millard Fuller and his wife Linda, the ministry of "partnership housing" was born in the 1970's. Jordan was an interesting guy. He was just 12 years old when he made a profession of faith during a Baptist tent revival in Sumter County, Georgia.

At the evening service, Jordan noticed a man in the choir who was robustly singing "Love Lifted Me." The music and the man's obvious love moved Jordan. When the altar call came, young Clarence Jordan said, "Yes!" He was so excited that night he hardly slept at all. Around 3:00AM he heard an agonizing sound coming from the prison yard adjacent to his bedroom. During the day he often talked to the prisoners through the razor wire fence. He befriended the men on the chain gang. Watching from the window that night, he could see an African-American prisoner who was being brutally tortured in clear view of his window. He was stunned to realize that the tormentor was actually the same man who had been singing "Love Lifted Me" a few hours earlier.

What you would expect to happen next, didn't. Instead of becoming angry and cynical at the hypocrisy of this man he had admired, Jordan, age 12, became fully committed to Jesus' message of radical peacemaking from the Sermon on the Mount. He promised God that he would work for racial justice and reconciliation in South Georgia.

He studied agriculture at the University of Georgia with the idea of bringing the latest, most scientific farming methods to the poor farmers of South Georgia, but he soon became convinced that the problems in his community, and the world, were more spiritual than economic. So he enrolled at Baptist Theological Seminary – the same school where Kathy and Dave Lohff graduated. He earned his Ph.D. in Biblical Studies and eventually translated the Greek New Testament into the vernacular of the rural South.

In 1942 Jordan and his wife Florence moved to a 400-acre farm near Americus, Georgia with the goal of creating an interracial, Christian farming community. Anyone was welcome, and everyone had to work. Individuals and families came. Some were college-educated, some were former sharecroppers who couldn't read or write. They called the farm *Koinonia*, from the Greek word meaning communion or Christian fellowship. *Koinonia* did not have an easy go of it. Because they were a mixed-race community, the KKK harassed them continually, burning crosses and wreaking havoc. The church where some of the community members belonged asked them not to come back after they brought a dark-skinned student from India to worship with them. Their farm machinery was vandalized; one family's house was burned. The town boycotted their produce. And then it got bad: bombs, machine gun attacks. Throughout that time Jordan continued his Biblical scholarship. He translated part of today's reading this way:

*Love is long-suffering and kind. Love is not envious, nor does it strut and brag. It does not act up, nor try to get things for itself. Love pitches no tantrums, keeps no books on*

*insults or injuries, sees no fun in wickedness, but rejoices when truth prevails. Love is all-embracing, all trusting, all-hoping, all-enduring. Love never quits.*<sup>i</sup>

They didn't...quit. In 1965 an Alabama lawyer named Millard Fuller and his wife Linda were struggling to save their marriage. Fuller had a brilliant business mind, but his personal life was a wreck. They came to Koinonia for the weekend, looking for a place to regroup and pray, and they ended up staying 5 years. In that time the Fullers and the Jordans came up with a plan to address the problem of poverty housing in South Georgia by building simple, decent housing for families in need using volunteer labor. They would then sell the homes at no interest for only the cost of land and materials. To this day more than 4 million Habitat for Humanity volunteers have built over 800,000 homes, not a few of those homes have been constructed by Woods volunteers.

You may say – that's a great story, preacher, but what does it have to do with love? Everything! The mission of Koinonia Farms, Habitat for Humanity, and other ministries like them -- such as Ministry of Hope, ChristCare, Souper Bowl of Caring, Sunday school ... these are the very definition of *agape* love. You may know that the ancient Greek language – the language of the New Testament, had not one, but seven different words for love, four of them are used in the Bible: *Eros* is physical love, *phileo*, means friendship or brotherly love, *storge* (*stor-JAY*), family love, particularly the love of parents and children, including siblings; and the word that Paul uses over and over and over in this passage; *agape* which is selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love, love perfectly displayed in Jesus and approximated by those of us who try our best to follow him.

With all the rancor and divisiveness that is part of our public life these days, it is vital for us to remember that love really *is* all around us. In fact, far more are working to bring the country and community and church together than to tear it apart. At Woods we say, "We Are One," and we mean that -- not because we are all the same, but because we share one goal, one value, one mission and vision: to welcome all to share in this work of transforming lives through Jesus Christ. We don't have to agree on everything to do that. What we have to do is love one another. I experienced this over and over again this week during Winter Relief, as we were able to share hot meals, transportation, and a warm place to sleep with some of our neighbors who are experiencing homelessness. Again, thank you to all who have served!

For some guests and volunteers it's easy, no big deal. For others living love this way is a new experience, awkward at first, maybe even frightening. Love is like that. Love requires courage, willingness to take some risk. You heard how God called Jeremiah to be a prophet to Judah when he was very young, like Clarence Jordan. Jeremiah objected, "No, God, sorry. Can't do that." Maybe Jeremiah knew better than Jordan the kind of risk involved in speaking God's word to a people too used to their sin. Both men overcame that fear and lived out their faith – in love.

Now I know how that sounds. Impractical? Perhaps. Sentimental? I hope not; you see, *agape* love is not primarily an emotion. In the Biblical sense, love is not a feeling at all. It's hard to tell in the English translation, but these words that Paul uses to describe love: patient, kind, slow to anger, steadfast, not irritable, resentful or rude – they are verbs! They describe love as

actions, or more specifically as a way of being in the world. Love is something you are and something you do.

Kids get this, often far better than adults. Someone asked a group of kids “What is love?”

Robert, age 5, said,

“Love is when your dog licks your face, even though you left him alone all day.”

Kristy, age 6, said,

“When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth.”

Cory, age 7, said,

“Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas when you stop opening presents and listen.”

Karl, age 5, said,

“Love is when you go out to eat and you give somebody some of your fries without asking for any of their nuggets.”

Nika, age 8 said:

“If you want to learn to love better you should start with a friend you hate.”

A four year old boy lived next door to an elderly gentleman whose wife had recently died. One day he saw the old man sitting alone in his back yard. The boy went over, climbed up in his lap and just sat there for a long time. Later when his mother asked what he’d said to the neighbor, the boy said, “I didn’t say anything; I just helped him cry.”

Love is compassion and generosity. Love is the reason we were put on this planet in the first place. Love is terribly demanding and heartbreakingly difficult. You can have all the education and success in the world and not know a thing about it. Love is the challenge that we all have to meet if we are to have healthy relationships and meaningful lives.

When we hear Paul say, “now faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love,” we know in our souls that it’s true. It’s why so many couples choose these verses for their weddings. But when Paul wrote these classic words, he wasn’t thinking of white lace and promises. He was writing to a church. It wasn’t a church like Woods, where people truly care and support each other. No, Paul was writing to a church that was as fractious as this country. The church in Corinth was broken in ways that only love can heal.

Today,

- If you are one of the 800,000 federal employees who don’t know if your job is going to be put on hold *again* on February 15,
- If you are facing a major loss, illness, or addiction,
- If you are struggling with loneliness or financial crisis,
- If you are having to stare down bullies like Clarence Jordan and the Koinonia community did,

It may seem as though Christ-like love is rare and hard to find.

Listen: if you are in a difficult, or God-forbid, an abusive relationship, please understand this text is not condoning or in any way asking you to submit to harmful behavior. Quite the opposite. In a situation of abuse, love is speaking up, reaching out to help – maybe more than one person. Abuse is not something you should ever try to deal with alone, because love is not only patient and kind, love is also truthful.

The opening scene of the film *Love Actually* takes place in one of my favorite places all in the world – the arrivals gate at the airport. Sometimes when I'm traveling I will go and just hang out there for a while, particularly if I'm in a large airport like Atlanta. You know? When you get off the underground tram, and go up that huge escalator and all the families are there, waiting for their loved ones, and the USO, and everyone applauds when the service members pass through the gate. Hugh Grant's character says that whenever he becomes overwhelmed with the state of the world, that's where he likes to go. Watch.

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It's true. Love *is* all around. Unfortunately love rarely makes the news, although if you listen you will hear stories like the one about 11-year-old Ruby Kate Chitsey. The fifth grader spends a lot of time in the nursing home where her mother works, so she's gotten to know the residents. Most are low-income, Medicaid patients. They don't have much, so Ruby asks around. What do they wish? One lady desperately wants her 12-year-old dog to come for a visit. Another resident said she hasn't tasted fresh strawberries in years. Ruby Kate made a list of all the wishes, mostly small things -- a haircut, particular snacks. A few wish for larger items -- a phone, or artwork. Ruby wrote them all down; then she got to work. She started a Go Fund Me page. As of yesterday she has raised \$70,000 to make the resident's wishes come true.<sup>ii</sup>

One of the great preachers of the last century put it this way:

Love is the key.  
Joy is love singing.  
Peace is love resting.  
Long-suffering is love enduring.  
Kindness is love's touch.  
Goodness is love's character.  
Faithfulness is love's habit.

Watch. Listen for it and you'll see: Love actually *is* all around.

I'd like to close today with a prayer written by blogger and author Holley Gerth. Let us pray:

Lord, make me love.

Because love is patient...  
Help me to be slow to judge, but quick to listen. ...

Because love is kind...

Help my words to be gentle and my actions to be thoughtful. ...

Because love does not envy or boast, and it is not proud...  
Help me have a heart that is humble and sees the good in others. ...

Because love is not rude or self-seeking...  
Help me to speak words that are easy on the ear and on the heart. ...

Because love is not easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs...  
Help me to forgive others as you have forgiven me.  
When I want to hold onto a grudge [help me] ...  
reach out with a hand of love instead.

Because love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth...  
Help me stand up for what is right and good.  
May I defend the defenseless, and help the helpless.  
Show me how I can make a difference.

Because love always protects and always trusts...  
Help me to be a refuge for those around me. ...

Because love always perseveres...  
Help my heart continually beat with love for you and others.  
Thank you for showing us what the word love really means.

Lord, make me love. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Gospel Version of Paul's Epistles*, Association Press, 1968, 66

<sup>ii</sup> Meghan Overdeep, "This 11-Year-Old Has Raised More Than \$70k to Grant the Wishes of Nursing Home Residents," *Southern Living*, February 1, 2019