

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
The Rev. Robert M. Alexander
“The Secret Ingredient”
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
4th Sunday after Epiphany
January 31, 2016

During my teenage years I would spend a week out of my summer visiting my grandmother in Spartanburg. Every year I visited she would make some of my favorite peanut butter cookies. I don't know what recipe she used – I'm sure my mom probably has it. The cookies likely had creamy peanut butter, and brown sugar, and butter, and baking soda, and salt, and flour, etc. But these cookies stand out above any other peanut butter cookies that I have ever had because of one other ingredient. When my Mawmaw made these cookies for me – she added love. Now that may sound a little silly to you, but I think it is this ingredient that makes these cookies special and gives them a lasting quality. The love that was poured into that cookie recipe gave those cookies permanence – and not like the preservatives that extend the shelf life of processed foods. The cookies didn't actually last longer because they were made with love – but rather – the memory of the cookies and how they brought my Mawmaw and I closer together during those summer weeks created a lasting impression that I will never forget.

Love is an interesting word, isn't it? It has so many different uses in the English language. We are already seeing one use springing up all around us as retailers invite us to buy their Valentine's Day paraphernalia. We are encouraged to buy or make a card for our sweetie. We are invited to show our love with flowers, sweets, or a night out. Children are assigned the task of making Valentine's for their classmates. Families might show their love by sitting down to a special meal. All in the name of love.

And there are other uses for the word. I love chocolate! I love that car! I love those shoes! Oh! I love this song! I love that movie! I love the beach...or the mountains. And somewhere in there is “I love you!” Though we may mean something different depending on the recipient. You may know that the Greeks had different words that they used for various relationships to express feelings of love. The word *eros* described a passionate more carnal kind of love. The word *philio* described what we sometimes call brotherly love – or the kind of love that two friends might have for one another. *Storge* is a word that described the love that a parent might have toward their child. Finally we come to *agape*, which describes a love that is unconditional – it is the kind of love characterized by sacrifice – by the giving of one's self for the sake of another. It is this love that the scriptures tell us defines Christ's love for us and it is this love that Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians 13.

As Jenny mentioned earlier to the children, many of us will associate these words with the wedding ceremony. It isn't a surprise that this passage is read at weddings. It is beautiful! And it serves as a guide and a goal for a couple as they begin their life together. But when the Apostle Paul wrote these words he wrote them to a community of faith and challenged them to infuse love – *agape* - into every aspect of their life together. Love was to be that secret ingredient that would give their life together a beautiful and lasting quality.

In chapter 12 Paul used the familiar image of the Body to describe how the members of the church community belonged together – each one working for the good of the whole. Everyone was connected and interrelated and no one was more important than anyone else. The Corinthians were known to rank

their gifts. Some who had certain abilities were given more honor and thought to have more importance in the body. Those who could speak in tongues – a special prayer language – or those who could prophecy – or those who thought they had received special revelations into the mystery of God – might have thought that their contributions were more important than others in the community. But Paul reminded them that all of their gifts came from the same Holy Spirit and that the gifts they had been given were not for their benefit but for the benefit of the whole community and therefore the benefit of the world. Gifts of speaking in tongues, prophecy, knowledge, etc. were not meant to make a member of the Body more important than another, but rather to give that individual an opportunity to serve the Body in a particular way.

Paul began chapter 13 by describing how vital love is. Without it, the gifts that the Corinthians shared in the body were wasted. **Love was to permeate everything they did.** Speaking in the tongues of mortals and angels referred to both their preaching and teaching, and also to their prayer language called “speaking in tongues.” Understanding mysteries and knowledge referred to special revelations that people felt they sometimes received from the Holy Spirit. The faith that moves mountains was that gift of belief that created deep courage, commitment, and perseverance in the community. And the sacrificial offering of one’s self and one’s possessions was lifted up as the pious thing to do within the community of faith. Paul explained that all of these gifts mean nothing apart from love. Love is what gives them permanence. Love binds the giver with the recipient in a lasting bond – a relationship of trust, care, and concern. Apart from love, the actions may have some momentary benefit but they will have no eternal significance.

So, what is this Love?

A group of 4-8 year olds were asked to share their views on the subject.

One boy said, “Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.”

Another replied, “Love is what makes you smile when you are tired.”

“Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other.”

“Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your french fries without making them give you any of theirs.”

“When you are born and see your mommy for the first time, that’s love.”

“Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well.”

“Love is when someone hurts you...and you get so mad - but you don’t yell at them because you know it would hurt their feelings.”

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

There is a great wisdom in the words of our children. You can hear some of Paul’s description in their examples. Paul describes 7 things that love is and eight things that love is not. Love is patient and kind, faithful, hopeful, and enduring. It isn’t pushy or jealous, or boastful or rude. It rejoices in the truth rather than falsehood. It never fails.

What if we took time to consider one of these aspects of agape love each day over the next couple of weeks? They could be used as in the daily practice of Examine – where at the end of the day you think back over your waking moments to see where you have been faithful and where you have strayed from God’s best intention for you. If you were to accept this challenge then tonight you might ask yourself, “Where have I practiced patience today?” or “Where have I failed to be patient?” The next night you might ask, “Where have I practiced kindness today?” And so on. This might lead you to thanksgiving or it

might lead you to confession and reconciliation. I guarantee that it will lead you to a deeper understanding and practice of love.

In the third section of the chapter Paul again emphasizes that the gifts we have been given will come to an end but that love will not. The journey of faith that we are on is a process and that journey will not be complete until the end. In other words – we have not arrived. Our life together is made up of incomplete things – things we don't fully understand – things that are not fully realized – things that are not by any means perfect and things that have not fully matured. It is like looking in the mirror, Paul says, and seeing only a dim, distorted reflection. The mirrors in the first century were polished bronze or silver which produced a less than clear image. Looking into one was nothing like seeing someone face to face. Paul reminds us that one day the church will see the fulfillment of God's purpose for us in Jesus Christ but we aren't there yet. It is the eternal gift of love that gives us a glimpse and draws us on toward that day. When we are motivated by love, when we speak with love, when we act with love, it is as if we are catching a glimpse of the fullness of that reality. Gifts like faith, hope, and love – these are lasting gifts that will never fade – and the greatest of these gifts is agape love!

A friend of mine had the opportunity to study in Geneva, Switzerland for a winter while he was in seminary. One of the reflections that he wrote about that experience speaks of how the church can get wrapped up in itself and forget its call to love.

"His eyes are sad." He wrote. "Mine are sad also. I cannot tell if the tears are his or mine, though I think perhaps their trickles mingle on our faces. Tears have come easily in these days of struggling with the church's role in the world. As I look into the eyes of Jesus here on the chapel's altar, I see only sadness. Do you see what I see?"

We sit in our classroom arguing theological and ideological points. Are you a liberal? Are you a conservative? People are dying, you know. The world spins in a horrible flurry of disaster, famine, violence. It is in the room with me today, palpable. My tongue is choked by the taste of the suffering world. My ears are struck by the theological mutterings around me, 'Blah blah blah Jesus Christ blah blah blah.'

His eyes are sad. I ask for forgiveness for the mockery we are making of his life and death. I am content to live my life in comfort while millions of my brothers and sisters suffer. I think loving my neighbor is a nice idea as long as my neighbor lives in a nice house with a big lawn like mine. Who are the Africans? Who are the Indians? Who are the thousands of men, women, and children, on the streets of Atlanta? They are nothing to me. I close my eyes and live my life in comfort.

But today I cannot close his eyes. I wish they would turn their gaze from me. I wish he could not see me. What is to be said in the presence of these sad eyes? What is ever to be said?

I cry. I sit on the fragment of the Berlin Wall that is here in the yard and my eyes fill with tears. Inside, my class yammers on, seemingly unable to see or hear or taste what it is that I am feeling. We hide behind our theological posturing. We hide behind our ideological positions. We hide behind the loudness of our voices or the sweetness of our tongues."

These words, penned nearly 2,000 years after Paul's, describe a church that has lost its way – has lost its purpose – has lost love. But the voice of God continues to call us beyond ourselves – continues to beckon us beyond our own self-interest – continues to remind us of the vitality and enduring quality of love.

Our Annual Report which we will receive as information during our Congregational Meeting today, bears witness to the truth that we have in so many ways heard this call as a congregation. And so we

celebrate all that has been done and said and given in love by the men and women of DCPC. The Senior adults, the middle aged, the young adults, college students, youth, and children of this congregation have, on so many occasions, been motivated by love to worship, learn, serve, and give, seeking to realize God's vision for the world. And it is through the gift of love that we have caught glimpses of that vision together. We celebrate that and give thanks while at the same time acknowledging that there have been times when our words and actions have not been motivated by love. Those things have not moved us closer to God's vision for the church or for the world. Agape Love is the secret ingredient that makes all the difference and so in all that we say and do we must ask that very basic question – "Is this motivated by love?"

Groundhog Day is this week. In the movie bearing that same name, Bill Murray plays a weatherman who is caught in a time warp – reliving the same day – Groundhog Day – over and over and over and over again. It isn't until he recognizes the secret ingredient that he breaks the never-ending miserable cycle of his life. It isn't until he discovers that his actions and words need to be motivated by selfless love that he is set free and able to truly live. And this is true for us brothers and sisters. "Are we motivated by love?"

It is true in the church and it is true in everyday life – in our relationships with spouses and children and siblings and classmates and neighbors. In our business dealings, in our policy making, and in our international relations. When our words and actions are motivated by the secret ingredient of agape love we are all set free and able to catch a glimpse of God's Kingdom right here, right now. And we know it when it happens and we don't forget it friends – because love remains.

So that's our challenge from Paul. We must make sure that the secret ingredient of love is in the mix. It won't come easy and it won't come naturally. But the more we practice it, the more we catch that glimpse of God's reality, the easier it will be to see and the more we'll give ourselves over to this way of being together. May it be so!

To God be the Glory! Amen.