

This Thing Called Love

This thing we call love, have you ever tried to collect and condense a personal definition of love? February with its celebration of Valentine's Day seems to be an appropriate time to think about that. Love as a feeling certainly is found celebrated in songs heard in many genres. In fact, the title of this sermon came from a phrase which came to mind as I thought about this text from the Apostle Paul. When I Goggled it, the first lyric that surfaced wasn't exactly what I expected. Queen is an artist whose name I had heard but whose work I had never encountered so that use of the phrase startled me...and I found it not appropriate. The one I remembered took more searching. When found it had come from Elvis and Johnny Cash. The phrase I sought was from *A Thing Called Love* and went like this: "This thing called love. It can lift you up, never let you down, Take your world and turn it all around, Ever since time, nothing's ever been found, That's stronger than love." This lyric seems to sum the way we define love as an ideal. Love is an emotion—a strong, binding emotion. Love as a concept is so tied up in our relationships with friends and family that defining it becomes problematic because it rarely ever perfectly matches the ideal. And these cultural and human expectations especially cloudy the issue when trying to untangle the concept from what it means scripturally. It certainly seems to me one of the most used—and quite frankly I would contend—one of the most abused—words of our language because it is used so frequently and almost interchangeably with liking. The dictionary describes it as a tender feeling of affection or attachment or devotion. That is a fairly clear and simple statement, but the feeling and the actions which seem to devolve from and around the definition rarely are. The text we have before us from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians is often called Paul's Ode to Love. This text is what follows Paul's words to the Corinthians about God's gifts of the spirit. We read this text as the first verses of chapter 13. In literature, a new chapter represents a division of thought in the narrative, but we need to consider Paul was not writing a text. Paul was writing a letter, a pastoral letter. This was not a theological explanation about spiritual gifts, but a letter to people about whom he cared who were trying to build a community. So reading this document as Paul wrote it, there would have been no break. Paul's thoughts would have been moving smoothly explaining how the diversity of these gifts came from one source for the benefit of the whole community created through relationships created through belonging to that one body. Along the way Paul has pointed out that those who have been brought into the body of Christ through baptism and faith have indeed been given various gifts because the community has need for those various gifts. Each gift has a role which is like the others—it fulfills a community need—it is not given to make the possessor special but to complete or make whole the community. And in today's reading Paul is continuing by giving us the way the Spirit does this through us as the body of Christ is grounded and rooted not in a desire by the Spirit to display divine power, but rather to instill in us a love from God that spills over everywhere into love of neighbor and enemy alike. This was a critical insight for the spiritual state and formation of the Christians in Corinth, and it remains a critical point for all who seek to follow Jesus now. Because of our trivialization and sentimentalization of the word love we must be careful to separate what Paul is describing as love from what our culture has to say about it. The culture in which we find ourselves tends to reward us for our accomplishments, for how much we can show we have done and

achieved for ourselves or even have contributed to the achievements of others—what things can we put on our resumes—In some ways we have not moved very far beyond the Corinthians comparison of the “gifts they have received” to establish a status or pecking order. This seems to be where Paul is when he writes the last verse what we read as chapter 12, verse 31: “But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” Now at first glance this seems somewhat puzzling. Paul has just said that the various gifts are different, but each is equally important and has a purpose. So what is he doing by now insinuating that there are superior gifts, and asking those in the congregation to “strive for the greater gifts”? The congregation has been divided, seeking status for themselves because of the gifts not using them in love to care for others. If Paul wants to change that behavior, what is this verse about? When you move to the next statement you can see that actually, Paul is sounding a clear warning that the spiritual gifts themselves can be made valueless if not given in love. Corinthians 13:1-3—“If I speak in the tongues of mortal 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.” As Paul continues his instructions to this congregation which is struggling with divisions, he defines love for them in the next few verses: 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 truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. In Paul’s definition of love—it is a verb, not an adjective. Verbs are the parts of language that describe action—describe what is done. These verses from Corinthians are often used as part of wedding services, but really the wedding service is not about love but about the vows, commitments and promises made between the individuals making those vows. So first, although at the wedding service, love is indeed something that felt and is believed to be present before those vows are made. The service is not about the feeling but about the commitment. These verses from Corinthians which Paul uses to define love are all action words. They are a list of fifteen actions---seven of the actions are ones that are to be done; eight of them are ones that are not to be done. These actions are the ones that followers of Christ will be led to do or to avoid as they follow the examples of love as shown by Christ and they continue to participate in the Spirit led work the church is called to do. That is to say, they are not words that describe what you feel or what you have to say about something, they are not expressions of sentimental affection as described in that definition pulled from the dictionary. Paul defined the source of power for the spiritual gifts given by God as love and told the Corinthians that they should focus on it—should strive for it. The theologian Fred Buechner wrote that love is not primarily an emotion, but an act of will...”. Paul would have endorsed this statement as he was encouraging the Corinthians to change their behavior toward one another---to strive to use the spiritual gifts they received from God in love—to be patient with one another. To act kindly. The list continues with actions which describe what it means to love with the love which is the gift—that superior gift of God which is Spirit led. After describing Spirit led love, Paul explains that there will come a time when the need for the other spiritual gifts of prophecy and knowledge will come to an end, because there will come a time of

completeness. For the Paul, what endures is love. For Paul love—Spirit led love is the anchor because “it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” It is what enables the community to be the body of Christ in this world. That has not changed. So we can conclude with Paul, “And now faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.” But we need to remember that for Paul, love was not a feeling but a Spirit-led doing following in the footsteps of his Lord. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.