
Endless Love

1 Corinthians 13

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery on February 3, 2013 at Duke Chapel

The timeless and never-aging performer, Tina Turner, asked a question that may help us today—“What’s love got to do with it?” No, I’m not going to sing it. I don’t have her unique voice nor do I have her hair or legs. But I will quote her.

You must understand
That the touch of your hand
Makes my pulse react
That it's only the thrill
Of boy meeting girl
Opposites attract

It's physical
Only logical
You must try to ignore
That it means more than that

Oh what's love got to do, got to do with it
What's love but a second hand emotion
What's love got to do, got to do with it
Who needs a heart
When a heart can be broken

Turner turns our attention to a relationship between a boy and girl in which a touch of a hand is only about the physicality of it all. A chemical reaction due to attraction. Nothing more. “You must try to ignore that it means more than that.” In this case, it does not mean love, which is a “second hand emotion” anyway, or as she sings later in the song, “a sweet old fashioned notion.” What’s love got to do with it? Turner suggests, nothing. Love has nothing to do with our relationships. Of course, Tina Turner endured a bruising abusive relationship with her husband Ike Turner. Watch the movie. Love had taken a U-turn in her life and gone in the wrong direction. Have you been there? In this song, like many popular songs, she’s dealing with the form of love known as *eros*, romantic love.

She points to the fact that romantic love is not always rosy though Hollywood may have us think otherwise. That’s why she also says, “I’ve been thinking of a new direction...I’ve been thinking about my own protection.” Have you ever wanted to protect your heart? She doesn’t want to be hurt by love. Romantic love may be hot and juicy and make your toes tingly, knees wobbly, skin sweaty, and eyes blurry so you can’t see straight. But Turner, the rock-n-roll diva, tells us with her raspy voice, that with love hearts can be also broken and so can lives. Romantic, erotic, love will not ultimately sustain a relationship or a community. What’s this type of love got to do with it? Nothing actually.

Though I was once known as ‘Brother Love’ in a former life, I’m not trying to be Dr. Ruth or a professor or psychologist of love this morning but maybe this is where the tension comes in when 1 Corinthians 13, the so-called hymn of love, is read in so many weddings as if it is a reference to sappy, sentimental, warm-fuzzy, “sweet old fashioned” love with its bouquet of flowers and fluffy-frilly dresses and fine black bowties and butterfly kisses. There is a beauty to Paul’s rhetoric but as my colleague Richard Hays has

written, Paul “did not write about *agape* [God’s love] in order to rhapsodize about marriage; he was writing about the need for mutual concern and consideration within the community of the church, with special reference to the use of spiritual gifts in worship.” The church at Corinth is a community where love has gone in the wrong direction or maybe even driven off the road so it’s not even seen anymore. Bye, bye love, bye, bye happiness. They’re a splintered congregation that tells each other “I have no need of you.” Paul writes about love because some church members are in need of a love transfusion through the intravenous blood line of the cross.

It is clear that many did not have love for one another flowing in their Christian veins. They speak with tongues of mortals and of angels. They have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and have faith to remove mountains. They give away all of their possessions, including handing over their body. They leap tall buildings in a single bound. They are super Christians (here I come to save the day!) on the surface, but underneath it all, below the sanctified skin of salvation, love is lacking and even MIA—missing in action. And without love, they are a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. They are ding dongs and are nothing and gain nothing. Nothing without love but ding dongs. Gossiping about someone to undercut his/her integrity (ding dong). Consumed with one’s own spiritual gifts without concern for another’s spiritual growth (ding dong). Boasting in a social justice pedigree of involvement but still having problems with the people in the pew (ding dong). Joining the spiritual gymnastics Olympic team, but have no love. Nothing but ding dong. (you got it!)

Christians can be loud (as we see all over the U.S.) but still act without love. All spiritual action is meaningless unless infused by and grounded in love, God’s love, *agape*. *Agape*, love, should harness our every activity. Ask yourself, “Why am I doing this or that? Is it for love? Is it in love? Is it out of love?” We can add up all of our spiritual powers and activities from our Christian to-do list and it never equal love. L.O.V.E. But love, according to Paul, is the “more excellent way.” There’s a lot of talk in the academy about excellence and what counts as excellence in one’s field. Well, the way of excellence in the Christian life is the path of love. It is the sine qua non of the life of faith. Paul’s description of love is in direct contrast to how the Corinthians functioned as a community. There has been no unity yet love is at the heart of any union. It is the primary gift of God to govern the many gifts. Love is a sign of the depth of our spirituality, not how extroverted or introverted our praise is; “they will know we are Christians by our love.” A life in the Spirit is a life of love. We may disagree about some things but there is no disagreement about the essential presence of love, God’s love, in the life of a Christian.

Why is love, God’s love, so important? Because without it, we are nothing. Without it, we are just religious poseurs and fakes. Why is love so important? Because Jesus said the two greatest commandments are to love God and love one’s neighbor as oneself. Why is love so important? Because God is love. God’s very nature is *agape*. And Paul clues us in on what that means. “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.” This sounds a lot like God. God’s love. Not a feeling or an attitude. In this scriptural setting, love builds up community (14:1). It does something. Real love has no awareness of merit or demerit. It doesn’t try to balance giving and receiving like Barney, the purple dinosaur theologian—“I love you, you love me, we’re happy family, with a great big hug and a kiss from me to you, won’t you say you love me too.” Even if unrequited, “love loves” (Howard Thurman). It is ethical in nature. “Let all that you do be done in love” (16:14). Love is behavior.

Love even prays. One afternoon on 216th street in Bronx, New York, as an infant, I struggled to breathe and convulsed in my mother’s arms due to a very high fever. One of my brothers had just arrived home from school and saw what was happening. He called my father at work, while crying and said, “Luke is dead. Luke is dead.” The ambulance arrived and rushed me to the hospital. Soon thereafter my other siblings came home and were told what had happened. At the hospital, they used a bucket of ice as shock

treatment to wake me up. The medical team said I was “out for 15 minutes.” Back at home, a neighbor who lived downstairs heard noise upstairs and came up because she wondered what was going on. When she came to our place, she saw love, believing all things. The noise she heard was of my four siblings (ages 4-13/14) pacing the floor praying for me. Love prays. Love is behavior. The love of God enfleshed.

And even though we don’t understand everything about this life completely due to our partial knowledge. Even though we’ll understand it better by and by. Even though “we see in a mirror, dimly” now. Paul is clear about one thing—love never ends.

Prophecies, tongues, and knowledge will come to an end. But God’s love is endless. God’s love never stops, can’t be stopped, won’t be stopped because it is eternal. Our gifts are temporary. Our envy and arrogance and rudeness are finite. Our irritability and resentment will not last forever (that’s a good place to say amen!). But love never ends. Time and space can’t stop it, which is why we continue to love our loved ones who have died. Not even death can put a hold on love.

Elsewhere, Paul preaches it this way: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” In other words, “the greatest of these is love.” The love of God. And we will see love face to face when God is our all in all at the end of time. We will know love fully and be fully loved in an infinite bond of love. The end of this passage signifies the end of time, when all will be Love. In the end is the greatest, love. Paul is not endorsing Rob Bell’s book but he is suggesting “love wins.” The final word in the gospel story is love. The love of God, a love that never ends, the greatest of these, a love stronger than death or even a stroke.

In a talk about live performance at Yale, Rebecca Ringle, one of this past year’s Messiah soloists, told a story about her mother who suffered a massive stroke. Her mother was unable to speak due to the stroke. When her mom was in intensive care, she sang Aaron Copland’s “Long Time Ago.”

On the lake where droop'd the willow
Long time ago,
Where the rock threw back the billow
Brighter than snow.

Rock and tree and flowing water
Long time ago,
Bird and bee and blossom taught her
Love's spell to know.

As she finished the lyrical melody of that song, she heard the first words her mother spoke since her stroke. Her mom simply said “again.” Rebecca’s mother made her sing it three times. At the end of each performance, her mom simply said “again.” When a person receives love, a melody of love, what else can one say but “again”? Love prays. Love sings.

When we encounter love in the face of God, then face to face, we will receive what we’ve been waiting for, longing for, believing for, hoping for, groaning for—unconditional love without end. Don’t you want to be loved? The loving, eternal embrace of God will cause us to say “again,” “again,” “again.” We won’t get sick of it nor will we get tired of it for it is this bond of love we desire even right now. Then face to face, we will be so drawn by Love we will realize like poet T.S. Eliot in his *Four Quartets* that “in my end is my beginning” and “the end is where we start from” because the end is Love, God, who is the beginning and the end. What’s God’s love got to do with it? Everything.

You can begin again today with love for it is a beginning that has no ending. “The whole earth is [a] hospital” and Dr. Jesus has the IV needle ready for the love transfusion. Are there any takers?