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## “All You Need Is Love”?

1 Corinthians 13 from Eugene Peterson’s translation entitled The Message

If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. 2 If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. 3 If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love. 4 Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, Doesn't have a swelled head, 5 Doesn't force itself on others, Isn't always "me first," Doesn't fly off the handle, Doesn't keep score of the sins of others, 6 Doesn't revel when others grovel, Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, 7 Puts up with anything, Trusts God always, Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end. 8 Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. 9 We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. 10 But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be canceled. 11 When I was an infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good. 12 We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us! 13 But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.

“Love.” It is either a foolish or brave preacher who would think that it possible to preach on such a topic without giving into gaseous vapidness or cliches. And if the preacher manages to avoid both of these, he wonders what can possibly be said about a topic, this word, that as noun, verb, and adjective so saturates our world. Love is everywhere it would seem. Toyota tells you, or they used to anyway, that you are going to “love” what they do to you. Or when you’re at King Soopers stuck in the checkout line, peruse any number of magazines and I guarantee you that at least some of them will have on its cover a reference to some article inside on some aspect of “love.” One preacher says this about this ubiquity of the word “love” in our culture:

We talk about love in such funny ways. We talk of "falling in it" as if it were a hole. We use the same word when talking about a favorite dessert that we use about a cherished individual. "I love my husband. I love pecan pie. I love humanity. I love my minivan. I love God." How do we take hold of this word?<sup>1</sup> Because it's everywhere, isn't it? An alien coming to our planet, watching our commercial, reading our magazines, cruising the internet would think that we must be creatures who are just *suffused* with love, because we talk about it so very often. In the mid-1990s I was writing a sermon that touched on this topic of love, and I remember doing a search to see how many webpages on the then still-new internet there were with the word "love" in them. I was surprised to find that there were already well over 80,000 webpages with the word "love" in them. This week I did the same search. How many webpages would you guess there are now with the word "love" in them? Four-point-one billion. How many is four-point-one billion? Well, if you laid that many average diameter human hairs side by side, you would have to go from here to Dalhart, Texas, to approach that number. Or, since I can't imagine anyone voluntarily wanting to go to Dalhart, you could also lay those hairs side-by-side all the way to Las Vegas, New Mexico. That's a lot of hair. That's a lot of love. Love is everywhere it would seem

And yet for all the ubiquity of the term "love" in our culture, in our advertising, in our everyday language, in our music, in our movies, and on the web, at the same time it hardly comes as a surprise to say that we are nonetheless lacking in love. In the musical *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle says this: "*Words, words, words! ... Don't talk to me of love, don't talk to me of June, don't talk to me of anything at all, just show me.*"<sup>2</sup> And that's sometimes the harder challenge, isn't it? If you thumbed through the

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/pennington-russell\\_4610.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/pennington-russell_4610.htm)

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in *Ibid.*

Gazette this morning or checked your Twitter feed or the online news sites, I suspect your first thought was not, *“Gosh, what a lot of love there is in the world”* or *“Goodness, isn’t the human race becoming more loving!”* We have the same challenge Eliza Doolittle had; our culture’s words don’t seem to match its actions. In his own way, St. Paul was facing on a much smaller scale this problem of the fact that words did not quite match reality there in that church 2000 years ago in Corinth. What do I mean? Well, we are probably most used to hearing this scripture as a part of wedding services. And its exhortations to patience and kindness and tenaciousness in one’s commitment to love can indeed be inspiring to those just starting out a marriage, as well as good words to recur to when a marriage hits a rough spot. But be that as it may, this was not the context that St. Paul was writing to. And that is why I loved coming across Eugene Peterson’s translation of this familiar text. In the more familiar translations, those without love are as if they are “a noisy gong” or a “clanging bell.” Good images, and yet how much fresher – if more startling – to read that such ones are like “rusty gates”! For you see what Paul was confronting there in Corinth was not a couple seeking advice on the occasion of a marriage, but a church that had divided into factions, where each faction had its own “special thing” and was proud of its labels, proud of its words, proud to describe themselves as not like those other ones. The Corinth church was the one that gave Paul the most grief over the years. He had to constantly admonish them for their pride that was proving divisive.

And so what Paul is doing today in this famous scripture is really this: He is telling those who would boast about their words, or who would see their primary identity as having this or that position on this or that issue, or who worshiped a certain way and looked down on those who didn’t as they self-righteously described themselves as better than those others – he’s telling these ones that their words are of little importance compared to the actions that they are lacking. He’s telling those who would boast about

their ability to speak in tongues, or have the “correct” positions on some topic, or who thought they were smarter than their fellow church members that they were **all** badly, badly mistaken.

For you see, love isn’t about being right. And although you’d never know it from our culture’s feeling-driven use of the word, love first and foremost is also NOT about a certain kind of feeling. Yet that’s so hard to keep in mind; I suspect that many of those 4 billion webpages that mention “love” in some way presume that love is something we feel or want to feel, or a feeling we want to enhance or feel more of towards a certain person. And, fact, this focus on feelings may well be what most defines our modern American culture. In this regard, preacher Gil Bowen says this:

...we are a people into feelings, are we not? Watch the next time you see some disaster reported on the news channel. The reporter thrusts a microphone in the face of a woman in obvious agony and what will that reporter ask her? "Can you tell us how you feel? **How do you feel?** ... We seem [to be] a people, a culture, caught up in the question of our feelings, absorbed in our moods, anxious about our state of mind. Advertisers appeal to it. Entertainers feed it. Therapists live off it.<sup>3</sup>

But things weren’t so different in Corinth. Again, in Reverend Bowen’s words:

...Paul’s words are a criticism of his friends in Corinth for whom religion has become focused [on attaining] a kind of emotional high... that carries them far out of the mundane and real world..... [But] the love of which [Paul] speaks is not so much something you are swept up in emotionally, as it is something you **decide and do.**<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>[http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/bowen\\_4426.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/bowen_4426.htm) Emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup>ibid. Emphasis mine.

For you see, the mistake that our culture makes, and the mistake that those in the Corinth church made, is this: **the goal of life is not to be happy**. Now, that may sound heretical to our feeling-and-happiness-driven culture, but it is true. The great psychologist Karl Menninger was once asked, “‘What is your formula for happiness?’ ... [Dr. Menninger] responded, ‘What makes you think this world is designed to make us happy, that we have a right somehow to happiness?’”<sup>5</sup> Well, I know what makes folks think that: it is those billions of web pages that talk about the **feelings** of love, it is that row of books in the book stores that tells you how to “feel better about yourself” and how you can achieve “happiness,” it is those semi-qualified radio and tv talk show hosts that seem to focus incessantly on encouraging you and I to gaze our navels and determine daily how “happy” we feel.

But here is the point: Christians ought to know better. Again listen to Reverend Bowen’s wise words:

If we turn to the [Bible]... we find ***very little interest in our feelings***, as such.

Oh, to be sure, there are the exhortations that we should be courageous, and not fear, not be troubled. [But] Such appeals are always in the service of that for which we are to give ourselves here in this world, that for which we are to live.

And what is that? ...If you ask [the Bible] about the purpose of your existence here in this world, what gives [your life] meaning, one answer always comes back. You are here to love: love your God, love your neighbor.<sup>6</sup>

No one says this better or more succinctly than my wife Barbara when she remarks that the goal and reason for a Christian life is indeed NOT to be happy, but rather two very different things: to achieve the **purpose** that God has for you, and to enjoy the **promise** that God has made to you. Promise and purpose. The **promise** of God is that our lives

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<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. Emphasis mine.

are ultimately meaningful and that we God cares for us now and eternally. But what is that purpose of our lives?

Well, our purpose is not to simply seek to meet our own needs, as the world would so often tell us, but to meet the needs of the world around us, in the place we have been put, with the talents we have been given. For Reverend Bowen is exactly right: to love is not about feelings, it is not about getting caught up in something that sweeps you away, it is not even mostly about you! No, love, as he so aptly put it is something that you **decide and that you do**. Love, for a Christian who would live out his or her purpose under God, is not about first of all about feeling happy; no, love is about our actions and our attitudes. It is **deciding** that we shall act lovingly even when that might not “meet our needs.” It is **deciding** that we shall have a certain attitude to someone or something, particularly when our feelings might be more inclined to exactly the opposite!

So, let’s sum up: From the Bible’s perspective, to be loving is not really about having or not having a certain kind of feeling. Love, from the Bible’s perspective, is a **decision**. Love is the **actions** that follow from that decision. To be loving to is to earnestly and authentically seek to find and follow the purpose that God has for us. Now, I will warn you: being loving in this way, acting in loving ways even when we do not feel like it one little bit, may not always make us “happy.” We may find times of frustration and sadness as we seek to minister and meet needs. And, in fact, one who would act lovingly will sometimes be very unhappy in the face of a world where sometimes human evil and mendacity have far too much power. But even with all of that, Paul’s words remain right: “The greatest of these is love.” Hear one more time from Rev. Bowen:

...love is as near to each one of us as someone who needs us. And there is always someone who needs us. This is why we are here, for the love that does

not insist on its own way in life, that not only hopes and believes, but that bears and endures the sufferings and the needs of those with whom we share life's way.<sup>7</sup>

*"There is always someone who needs us."*

This morning, as we come to the end of the summer, as we begin to turn our minds towards fall and its new possibilities, that's the question that I would put to each one of you: **who needs you?** Who needs the love you have to give by using the particular talents and gifts and graces that God has given you? How can you use them even more effectively to meet those needs that God puts in your path. On the inside back cover of your bulletin this morning is a blank page. It's not because we couldn't think of anything to put there. It's for you to provide the closing content of this sermon. So for the next three minutes I want you to look at that page and think about the following question; write your thoughts on the page if you want: *What can I decide to do to better express love, to better use the talents and resources God has give me, to better achieve the purpose God has for my life?*

When the Beatles sang "*All you need is love,*" they were right – but for a completely different reason than I suspect that they had in mind. All a Christian needs to live a purposeful life is indeed the commitment to doing acts of love, to making use of one's talents to meet needs. Or to return to Paul's words, who said it best: "Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love." Indeed it is, indeed it is.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.