A reading from Paul’s first letter to the Church in Corinth, Chapter 13:

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 the now 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.¹

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“What’s love got to do, got do with it? What’s love but a secondhand emotion? What’s love got to do, got to do with it? Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?” Tina Turner made this song by Terry Britten and Graham Lyle famous when it became the biggest single in 1984 in the United States.²

“What’s love got to do with it?” That’s a great question for us to ask ourselves on this Sunday following Valentine’s Day as we pack our hearts away until next year at this time. It just might be a good question to ask ourselves in this season in our world today when we struggle to see a
little love at times. So, we placed some paper hearts in your bulletins this morning. I want to invite you to take it out and hold it as we spend some time talking about love this morning.

When I looked up the definition of love this past week, I noticed that the first definitions described love as a type of emotion, very much like Tina Turner’s definition. Webster’s began, “strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties.” The first descriptions that come to our minds are about how we “feel” when we experience “love.” It’s an emotion, right?

Last week, however, a rare handwritten note by the great civil rights leader, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was sold on the marketplace. While it is a brief note, it appears that Dr. King was responding to a request that he write down his definition of love. He said, “Love is the greatest force in the universe. It is the heartbeat of the moral cosmos. He who loves is a participant in the being of God.” In case you are interested, it is currently being offered for the low price of $42,000.

For Dr. King, love was apparently more than an emotion. It is that force that compels us to act in our lives. Emotions come and go. Some days I feel loving and other days, I do not. Sometimes I feel loved and other times, I do not feel loved. Some days I am easier to love than others. Just ask my wife, Dawn. Love, however, has to be more than simple emotions that fade. The very nature moves us to participate in who God is and what God is doing in the world around us.

Last year, some of our journey groups studied the book *Everybody Always* by Bob Goff. Throughout the book, Goff challenges his readers with his own efforts to love others like Jesus loves. Goff says, “Every time I wonder who I should love and for how long I should love them, God continues to whisper to me: Everybody, always.” For Goff, it’s not simply about feel good emotions, it’s about the everyday actions of our lives. It’s about how we love everybody, always. Sounds easy enough, until you read the newspaper, or check Facebook, or encounter the ones who wronged you.

One of our study groups took the better part of a year to finish the book. Some in our group liked that he made it simple to think about how we love others. He talks about how he does it in his own life and his own struggles. On the other hand, others thought that he was just too simplistic and there wasn’t much depth. Perhaps part of the challenge for us is that we make it more difficult than it needs to be.

For instance, it’s quite a challenge to “love everybody,” “always,” isn’t it? What about those folks that are just too difficult to love? You know, those folks who really annoy you? Please tell me that you have them among your family and friends. You may have even been seated next to them on a plane or stood behind them in the grocery store. They might be the ones who always crash the party when they come around, usually uninvited. When you think of our last sermon series, *Beyond Us vs. Them*, they are the people who are always carrying a banner and your own defenses go up the moment they come around.

Goff writes:
When I meet someone who is hard to get along with, I think, Can I love that person for the next thirty seconds? While they continue to irritate me, I find myself counting silently, ...twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine...and before I get to thirty, I say to myself, Okay, I’m going to love that person for thirty more seconds. This is what I’ve been doing with the difficult commands of Jesus too. Instead of agreeing with all of them, I’m trying to obey God for thirty seconds at a time and live into them. I try to love the person in front of me the way Jesus did for the next thirty seconds rather than merely agree with Jesus and avoid them entirely, which I’m sad to say comes easier to me. I try to see difficult people in front of me for who they could become someday, and I keep reminding myself about this possibility for thirty seconds at a time.  

For me, this past week, it was the person who tried to scam both staff as well as church members as they came up with a fake email address impersonating me. Friends, I know I’ve said it before, but I’ll say it again. I won’t email or text you for gift cards for people in need. Some people just make it hard to love them, don’t they? And that’s not even the people that we see every day that are difficult. What does it mean, however, to love someone for 30 seconds at a time; to love them for who they may become; to love them as God does in the face of faults and failures and downright offense?  

Is the Church not the place where this happens all the time; right here in the body of Christ? People who liked and who didn’t like Bob Goff’s book came to the study to share with one another for almost a year. They cared more about each other. Here in this place each week, we move beyond the political divides of a nation to be present with one another. You don’t think twice about that person that annoys you when you heard his or her name on a prayer list. You pray for him or her. You know that love is not about the emotions of the day, but about the actions of every day. You take the time to be with people and to pray for them. You send their children on mission trips. You provide Sunday School and Vacation Bible School for them. You welcome them at the table. We may not always think alike, but we certainly strive to love one another here in this place in the face of our differences.

One of the greatest examples of this is our variety of journey groups. I’ve been a part of a few in my time here. Arbon Dennis, a Wednesday morning men’s journey group, has been going for a number of years. No matter what they are reading and how long it takes them to get through a book, they gather each week to pray for one another. Sometimes they disagree with one another. Sometimes they challenge one another. But they hold out a care and love for one another in their dedication to being there for each other each week at 6:30 a.m. You don’t do that unless you care about what’s happening in one another’s lives.

While our scripture lesson this morning is the most-often-chosen chapter for weddings, Paul is moving us to understand God’s love and the love we are called to have for one another in Christ. This was not intended to be a marital treatise. Rather, it is Paul’s defining statement on love. This is the essence of St. Paul’s understanding of God’s love and the love we are called to have for one another, as well. He didn’t say it was about how he felt about someone on any given day. Rather he said, “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.”

The other day, I stood up here at the altar with a team of our staff who gathered to pray for Patty Glass, our Director of Communications. She was scheduled to have surgery this past week. As we gathered, she said, “I just don’t know how others who don’t have a church do this. The prayers and love of this church are just so amazing.”

Love becomes the greatest force in the universe as it is lived out among the people of God in such a way that God’s presence is made more visible among us. In the rest of the world, we write one another off when we’re offended or upset. How many times have you seen a Facebook friend just clear out their friends list? How often have you done that? But God’s Facebook will always list you as a friend, and that’s why we seem to be that place that folks return to time and time again. The welcome doesn’t end here.

Paul began the passage with these words, “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.” Love is more than a second-hand emotion. It is how we act on a daily basis. As we think about the state of our nation and our world, there is perhaps plenty of noise to go around that could easily drown out love’s message. The challenge is not who we should love or how we shall love our neighbor. Rather, it is “How might we rise above the noise?”

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[Benediction]: Take out your heart again this morning. Oscar Hammerstein once wrote, “A bell’s not a bell ’til you ring it – A song’s not a song ’til you sing it – Love in your heart wasn’t put there to stay – Love isn’t love ’til you give it away!” Look at that heart. What love is it waiting to receive from you? With whom will you share an act of love as it’s given away this week?

1 I Corinthians 13, NRSV.
2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What%27s_Love_Got_to_Do_with_It_(song)
3 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/love
6 Ibid., 54.
7 Ibid., 54.
8 I Corinthians 13:4-8, NRSV.
9 I Corinthians 1:1, NRSV.