

“Love in the Gifts”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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## 1 Corinthians 13

Lewis Galloway is the pastor of Second Presbyterian Church here in Indianapolis, and he writes the following:

*Some texts have such a well-established setting in the life of the community of faith that it is hard to dislodge them from their ritual captivity or see them with fresh eyes. It is difficult to hear 1 Corinthians 13 without thinking of white dresses, rented tuxedos, bouquets, unity candles, and all the other practices and paraphernalia that the culture uses to prop up its romanticized notions about marriage.*

Paul’s letter to the Church in Corinth speaks simply and completely about love. For most of us, it accompanied our wedding service, or at least was read at the last wedding we attended. That is because it speaks of what love is and how God’s love is the source of a couple’s love for one another.

At the end of wedding sermons, I usually give a charge to the couple which goes something like this: “There are those gathered around you here and those who could not be here, all of whom will be with you throughout this journey you are about to embark on. They will share in your plenty and want, will rejoice in your joy and grieve in your sorrow, will care for you in your sickness and be by your side in your health. In times of trial or loneliness, do not hesitate to call on them, for that is why they are a part of your lives. Above all else, remember that you are children of God, and because God loves you, you will forever be nurtured in your love for one another.”

But, as Galloway says, this passage is so much more than about romantic love. *This stunning word on the nature and practice of Christian love needs no human props to speak powerfully to many other situations in the life of the church. These words come to life when one remembers that they arose out of a pastoral crisis in the Corinthian church. The Corinthian Christians are abusing their freedom, refusing to share, scorning their neighbors’ spiritual gifts, boasting in their own gifts, seeking recognition for themselves, and jockeying for position in the church. The problem is not the lack of spiritual gifts, but the ways in which these gifts are exercised. These struggles are as common today as they were in the time of Paul* (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 302*).

The Corinthian Church was one of the earliest churches Paul founded, but also one of the most diverse. This reflected the cosmopolitan city in which it was located. As a result, there were many opinions about how individuals were to live their lives, and how the church was to function. As we have talked about over the last two weeks, in this letter we find references by Paul to both individual practices, and how, as a community, they are to be the Body of Christ. It is into this conflicted situation that Paul shares the gospel of love.

In the first paragraph, he reminds the Corinthians that it does not matter how gifted you may be, those gifts are nothing without love. I can speak with the eloquence of angels and mortals, I can foresee the future like a prophet and understand things others cannot comprehend, I can give away all that I have to those who are in need – I can do all those things and more, if I desired. But if I do not have the love of God in my heart as I am doing them, then “I am nothing; I gain nothing; I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

Good acts are good, but they are worthless unless they are motivated for the right reasons, namely out of love.

That leads Paul to describe what love is. This list is so familiar we could probably recite it from memory. Patient and kind, not envious or boastful, nor arrogant or rude; it doesn't insist it have its own way; not irritable or resentful; it doesn't take pleasure from wrongdoing, but is joyful when the truth is revealed. Love can carry the load, believes anything is possible, never gives up hope, and will last forever.

Throughout this list, love is the subject of every verb. It is not a sentimental feeling which remains in our hearts or is something abstract. Instead, it is the source of the action – love acts. Paul is trying to tell the Corinthians that their conflicts are the result of not acting out of love for one another. Resentment, arrogance, boasting – these things are not present when love is around. “The impression one gets is that love primarily functions in situations of stress and conflict, anything but the romanticized version so popularly held” (*Texts for Preaching: Year C, 128-129*).

Paul concludes by making clear that spiritual gifts will not last forever, but love will. Our gifts which God has given to us are important, and are meant to further God's kingdom while we are here. But they will last only as long as we last on this earth. They belong to the present, the time in which we are living. When we know that God loves us and that everything we do comes from that love, then that is when we are transformed. It is like our development from children to adults; the change which takes place is monumental in our understanding of the world. So is the change which takes place when we come to accept God in the form of Jesus Christ as Lord. Jesus Christ is that love, and that love is what will endure forever. “Faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Could it be that when our service in the church becomes routine and joyless, we have forgotten love? Could it be that when hold onto grudges from long ago over petty things, we have forgotten love? Could it be that when we step into the shadows instead of stepping forward to share our spiritual gifts, we have forgotten love?

Could it be that this upcoming time of renewal we have been blessed with might be an opportunity to rediscover not only our spiritual gifts, but also the love with which we are called to use them? Could it be that we might rediscover that while “faith, hope, and love abide, these three; the greatest of these is love?”

We are the Body of Christ, and the spiritual gifts we have been blessed with are our means of making that Body stronger, healthier, and broader in its ability to reach more with the gospel message. But those gifts are nothing without the love we know in Jesus Christ. As we discern and share our spiritual gifts, may we do so with the knowledge that those gifts are grounded in love: love for our neighbor, love for the stranger, love for our God.

Thanks be to God for the love we have been shown in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.