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Quinquagesima
1 Corinthians 13
February 7th, 2016

It's just a lot of noise!! That's what preaching is without love – according to St. Paul in his first letter to the Church in Corinth. If I don't include love in this message, I might as well be beating a cymbal and making a lot of unnecessary noise that hurts the ears – like fingernails on a chalkboard or two metal knives scraping together (this was how we would upset my sister). One can hardly stand it.

There is no rhythm to this kind of proclamation. There is no melody to language. There is no true substance to what I'm doing right now without the subject and the object that is love.

Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a letter he wrote from prison during the Nazi occupation of Germany said that Christian love expresses itself in outgoing, self-forgetful activity. Ahhh – the word, “activity” accompanies love. True love is outgoing and “self-forgetful.” It goes out. It gets the job done. There's more to it – so much more – than a feeling you get in your stomach – an infatuation with something or someone. Love is deeper than that and it works. It works outwardly. That's what Paul is telling us in the Epistle reading for today.

And that is what Paul is telling such a messed up church in Corinth. Allow me to say a few quick things that you might be interested to know about the Church in Corinth which sets the stage for what Paul wrote about love. First of all, Paul loves the Church in Corinth. He founded it toward the end of his second missionary journey. But it had its problems because the city had problems. Having many false religions was “kinda the thing,” for this great city. Among them were two philosophies – Stoicism and Epicureanism. I won't bore you with great detail, but here's a quick definition... Epicureanism encouraged the pursuit of pleasure, tranquility and the avoidance of all pain and fears – especially the fear of death. One can see how the Church in Corinth, with this philosophy would get “love” wrong. Stoicism was all about freedom and individualism. There was no use for community and working for the greater good for the sake of the neighbor. One can see how the Church in Corinth, with this philosophy would totally get “love” wrong. In both cases, true love produces the opposite of these two philosophies.

“Okay, pastor, so what? That was almost 2000 years ago! What about our Church and love and our lives lived for each other today?” Good question. I wanted to share with you the struggles of that day to show you that we still struggle with the same things today. Let's take a look.

Today we live in a fast-paced, achievement-oriented world. It's got to come quick or it's not worth the time. It's got to come quick or it won't come at all, we sometimes think. The spirit of this age tempts even the church to look at quick and impressive results. It makes sense because we are a results driven society. If we can see it, measure it, and see that we are trending in a positive way, then, by definition, we must be successful.

What about your personal life? Same thing. Successful parenting means that children grow up to be successful – by measure of good job, good family, and making a lot of money. Successful marriage means you were instrumental in changing the bad behaviors of your spouse. You were good about getting your husband to clean the house. You were good about getting your wife to cook dinner most every night. They do these things now which means you were a success. And you are so much happier because you can measure this type of success, share it with your neighbors, and they will envy your successful relationship.

You and I know it – that's a bunch of malarkey. But sometimes our hearts believe these lies. Don't believe them. Listen, rather, to St. Paul as He describes what love truly is: *Patient, kind,*

not envious, not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. We could spend all day treating each of these attributes of love and see how Paul puts his finger right on the pulse of what love is. And, perhaps the first quality is the best: love is patient.

Patient is a word we hear often. “Be patient and wait your turn,” says the lady at the post office. “Be patient, dinner will be done in a minute,” says my good wife. In many instances we don’t have to be patient too long. If we do, then a major injustice has occurred. You are having me wait to send my package? You mean you are not going to cook my food?” How horrible!” The deeper understanding of true “patience” loses its meaning when this is the way we see patience.

Better understood is what is in 1 Corinthians 13. A better definition for patience is “longsuffering.” Love is longsuffering. Love suffers long and patiently endures all things, says St. Paul. Love never ends.

This is why it so important for us to see love for what it actually is. St. John says it this way: “God is love.” Love is personified in the person of Jesus. He took on flesh and walked around. He was love in action, outgoing and self-forgetful. He is love as He is the one who took on all our sins – the most self-forgetful thing ever – and loved you to death – not only giving you a great example of love, but showing you what true love does. It is longsuffering.

True love long-suffers. It comes right alongside of us and instead of patting us on the back and saying, “Don’t worry, you will be fine. You will get over it. You are going to be okay.” True love steps right into the mess we are in, wraps its arms around you and holds on tight – never letting go. True love says, “This is hard, and this will probably get harder, but I’m going nowhere. I am here with you.” True love became a child who was born at Christmas, lived a life completely for the sake of you, entered the Holy City at the time of the Passover knowing full well what would become of Him, stood before an angry crowd and allowed the hateful shouts, the hateful hands that struck Him, the hateful hammer blows that pounded those nails into flesh – all for you. And at that moment, when Jesus was so far away – hanging on a cross – He was actually right there with you because He knows your pain, with you in struggle, takes on to Himself your agony. That’s a love like no other.

So that understanding of love being longsuffering comes into focus. That definition from Bonhoeffer begins to have real meaning – love is outgoing and self-forgetful – especially when we see Jesus. This is our love for others. This is our love for our spouse, our family, this family, and one another. Love is longsuffering. Those who know true love know this is true. Love is outgoing. It moves, it works, it shows. Love is self-forgetful. Oh, it must be these three things. It must be because look at the cross of Christ. Longsuffering, outgoing, self-forgetful describes what happened on Good Friday better than anything we could make up on our own.

This love is for you. It’s for those you love. It’s what love actually is. Think of these qualities that Paul shares with a messed up church in Corinth when you think of love. Think of the love of Christ for you, when you have the blessed opportunity to love your neighbor. You know who gave you that opportunity to love you neighbor. You know who gave you the longsuffering so that your words to those you love are not simply a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. I know, I don’t even have to say it. It was the one who loved you first. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.