

“Enduring Love”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; May 17, 2020

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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 then 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.

Annie Dillard writes nonfiction and contemporary American novels. She got her start with a memoir called *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which begins by describing her home in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. She writes, “I think of this house clamped to the side of Tinker Creek as an anchor-hold. It holds me at anchor to the rock bottom of the creek itself and keeps me steadied in the current, as a sea anchor does, facing the stream of light pouring down. It’s a good place to live; there’s a lot to think about.”

I love that metaphor of Dillard’s house being a great anchor, holding her steady even as the waves wash about. It captures the sense of our worship series this month, “Rooted in the Flood”, reminding ourselves of what anchors us as people of faith amid the tumult of global pandemic and economic collapse. We started last week with “Working Together”, like the Apostle Paul with the other tentmakers in Corinth. Today, we remember the foundational commitment to love, that love for God and neighbor which is the cornerstone of our house of faith. And there is no better description of such love in community than the 13th chapter of Paul’s first letter to the quarrelsome Corinthian church.

We are accustomed to hearing 1 Corinthians 13 at weddings, descriptions of the ideal love that this marriage will embody. However, in their original context these verses address a divided community. One commentator [notes](#) that, “this is a message more to those on the brink of divorce than the beginning of a relationship.” Paul is addressing a church embroiled in conflict over whose spiritual gifts were best. Some said that faithful knowledge of scriptural mysteries mattered most. Others claimed that prophetic power was essential in order to understand the signs of the times. Still others insisted that glossolalia, an ecstatic speaking in tongues, was the only sure sign of the Spirit’s presence. Their worship services were a cacophony of competing interests, all vying for their time in the limelight. It made it nearly impossible to gather together for fellowship, or break bread in unity at the communion table.

As it was then, it continues to this day. Churches and other communities persist in sometimes bitter disagreement. Congregations can get fixated on achieving essential needs, foolishly pitting them against each other. Will we prioritize teaching ministries, or digital outreach, or volunteer service, or advocacy for social justice, or balancing the budget, or music ministries, or care for the homebound, or something else? I’m glad that at EMC we generally don’t see these as competing priorities, but each important in its own right. That said, I know we have our own history of bitter congregational division. In Bible study this week, I heard stories of fights over whether smoking would be allowed in Fellowship Hall, and whether the rolls at funeral luncheons should be buttered before serving. It sounds like we found a compromise to

the great butter controversy, but some people left the congregation when smoking was no longer permitted!

I certainly understand how passionate convictions can cause enmity and division. Indeed, when we stand for actions of justice and compassion, it necessarily means opposing actions that would do otherwise. But Paul suggests that community life can become a food fight if ardent supporters of each position or spiritual gift presume that their concerns are more important than compassion for others. Paul tells the Corinthian church that they are blessed with a *multitude* of spiritual gifts! But what's needed in the tumult of competing voices is a common understanding that will help make sure all people in the boat, no matter where they sit, are anchored together, rooted in the storm. So he points to divine love—“*agape*” in Greek—and says, “This is what will keep you secure and connected, even in the midst of tension.”

Paul describes in detail the love that grounds this ship of faith. He says, in one common translation, that love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” In other words, love puts up with disagreement and has patience for the sake of the other, though not in a way that's self-erasing. This passage has occasionally been misused with victims of domestic violence, or other people preyed on by the powerful, suggesting that if they were really to show love, they should “endure all things”. But love does not require being a doormat, forever nice, meek or accepting in the face of harm. Sometimes love confronts in order to correct, like a parent with a wayward child. *Agape* serves others in righteousness, rejecting injustice yet never seeking to snuff out the divine love in others or oneself. This is the persevering love that, in The Message Bible paraphrase, “Always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end.”

Such other-centered love, with regard for the care of all, is being tested right now. In this time of coronavirus, *agape* love may be hard to find across screens or within the homes we've been largely confined to for eight weeks. What does love look like now in the wider communities of the Twin Cities, Minnesota, or the United States? While some clamor to “reopen” or “liberate” after stay-at-home orders, love recognizes that this may be dangerous for the most vulnerable among us. As we move forward through this pandemic time and gradually seek to open up, how can we do so that puts the care of others before love for our own way?

Author and UCC leader Cameron Trimble [writes](#) that as churches and other businesses start to resume in-person activities,

the question we face is: Who will we leave behind? COVID-19 is with us until we have a vaccine or cure. We know that some of us are more vulnerable to being killed by this virus if we contract it. We are caught between the tension of restarting our economy and doing so while the vulnerable among us remain isolated by 'stay-at-home' orders. Does your office reopen, knowing that many on your team risk their lives by coming in? Who will we leave behind?

...Do we open the church and carry on knowing that our oldest members, already struggling to engage new technology, will be left out of important moments of being a community together? Who will we leave behind?

Trimble suggests that the loving thing is to NOT leave people behind, but to move forward in a way that allows the greatest possible inclusion. There may be multiple paths to go forward in loving ways—some congregations have decided to stay closed for at least the next year, while others are still trying to find some safer ways to be together in person.

We are certainly on the horns of that dilemma too, yet as we seek to find the answer that's right for Edina Morningside this morning's scripture helps us stay rooted in the storm. Paul reminds us of what we're called to as a church of Jesus Christ. We're not a business like other businesses; we are ambassadors of the reign of love! Our Christian communities—like our family and friend relationships, and every way we interact with others—ought to be a foretaste of what God's reign will be like. We may

not immediately transform the whole culture at large with *agape* love, but we can model such love in our personal and faith life, trusting that this will be transformative in the culture, like yeast in bread dough. That is the opportunity and responsibility of navigating this time as a church, for each other, in partnership with those most fragile, and for our society. Who will we NOT leave behind, for the sake of love? Amen.