**What Is Love?**

**Co-pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**Nutana Park Mennonite Church, Feb. 3, 2019**

*Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:16-30*

As I was preparing this sermon, I asked our five-year-old this question: what is love? And his answer was pretty cute, if I do say so myself. He said it means that “you hug someone and kiss them (but not at school, cause that’s how germs are spread) and that you’re nice to them. It’s when you like someone a lot; it’s a little more than liking someone.”

Aside from the cuteness factor, the reason I thought I’d ask my son is because although he doesn’t know this, he happens to be the person who has taught me the most about love. In those first days of parenthood, when I discovered that having a new baby was so much more overwhelming and sleep-deprived and physically uncomfortable than I had anticipated, I also discovered that I loved this little person so much more profoundly than I ever thought possible. Parenthood really is, as I’ve heard someone describe it, like having your heart outside of your body, walking around in the world. It’s the deepest love possible.

This morning, the lectionary points us to a very famous biblical passage on love in which the Apostle Paul tries to answer this same question – what is love? This passage is very often selected for wedding ceremonies. In fact, First Corinthians 13 is used so often in weddings, that some people – pastors especially – simply call it, “the wedding passage.” I wanted to try a little experiment, if you’ll bear with me: how many of you have ever been at a wedding where this passage was used or chose it for your own wedding, if you’re married? Let’s have a show of hands.

It’s no wonder it’s such a popular passage – it’s downright poetic:

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. . . . And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor. 13:1-8a, 13)

Now I for one find it a bit surprising to remember that Paul was writing this eloquent passage about love not to a couple embarking on marriage, but to a congregation that had been struggling with unity. This was one of the early churches in the city of Corinth, that was having trouble figuring out what it meant to be a church, since this was a really new concept. I spoke a few weeks ago about some of the major, glaring mistakes that they were dealing with – everything from arguing about which spiritual teacher to follow to some people having too much communion and others getting none!

It is to this (quite frankly) dysfunctional church community that Paul is writing these ethereal words about love. But I think that maybe we need to back up a bit and parse out what we mean by love vs. what love means in the Bible. In our context, full of pop songs and Valentine’s Day, love has come to mean primarily romantic love – those warm, fuzzy feelings that we have for someone when we’re “in love.” I actually really like the description of love in Joni Mitchell’s song, “Both Sides, Now” – “Moons and Junes and ferris wheels, that dizzy dancing way you feel, as every fairy tale comes real. I’ve looked at love that way.” The centrality of romantic love in our culture is why we associate this passage so easily with weddings, which are of course celebrations of romantic love within the context of the church community. But I find it interesting that in Paul’s description of love, he is speaking not only about a feeling, but about something lived out – love for him involves the correspondence of the inner intentions and outer actions. He talks about how we can go through all the motions of righteous living, but unless we do these things out of love, they are meaningless – they are without integrity, they are not genuine.

So, he speaks about using beautiful, inspiring language, which is just noise, just empty words if it is not connected to love. He speaks about powerful prophesies and profound knowledge and miraculous faith, which amount to exactly nothing without love. He speaks about selfless acts of sacrifice – giving away everything one has, risking one’s life for a good cause – which again, mean little if they are only done for the sake of “boasting,” not love. We can do all these seemingly righteous things out of a small-minded self-righteousness, or a petty sense of superiority or legalism. We can even get competitive about how righteous we are, as the Corinthians seemed to have done, trying to out-do one another as the “better Christian.” Whenever I think of hypocritical, “holier-than-thou” Christianity, I think of the movie *Saved* (2004), which stars Mandy Moore as a very self-righteous fundamentalist Christian teenager who actually bullies the main character, Mary, because her boyfriend turns out to be gay. There’s one scene in which the girls are just coming from a Bible study and Moore’s character gets upset at Mary, who has tried to tell her she doesn’t feel very supported in their friendship. She actually throws her Bible at Mary, while shouting, “I’m filled with the love of Jesus!” Not exactly the genuine, patient, kind, truthful, and hopeful love that Paul describes!

And that’s the thing, isn’t it? It’s not enough to simply say we are loving people, or even just to feel loving. It’s necessary to live out that love in what we do. That’s central to the Biblical understanding of love – it’s not just a feeling, but a feeling that is enacted in our daily lives, something practiced in both senses of the word – practiced as in put into practice, but also that it takes practice. This resonates with my own parenting journey as well. I remember it being such an adjustment when our son was born – getting used to my time and my body not being my own, ever, for the first few months. And then I had to get back to my studies, because I didn’t have the privilege of a maternity leave, being a graduate student in university at the time. Patience was really hard to come by, for me, and was something I had to learn. Parenting in general is a learned skill, something that takes practice. I feel that now, 5 years into our parenting journey, I’m so much more skilled at it, and I’m so much more patient with my children, and I have so many more problem-solving skills in my back pocket than when they first handed that little crying boy to me in the hospital 5 years ago. And it’s love that we live out every day, and put into action. No wonder the Bible so often uses the image of God as our Divine Parent and we as God’s beloved children. The love between parents and children really is the most profound kind of love in human experience – enduring all things, never ending, stronger, even than death. And though not all of us are parents, all of us have been someone’s child, and so have had a taste of this kind of love.

A powerful example of this is a video that I’ve seen circulating of a father whose 20-year-old daughter tragically died in an accident, and her organs were donated. That father rode his bicycle over 2,000 km to visit the man who had received his daughter’s heart in a transplant that saved his life. The father, really emotional, approaches the man, and embraces him, and he hands the father a stethoscope and opens up his shirt. The father puts it on and listens to his daughter’s heart beating in this young man’s chest, and is so emotional to be hearing that one little part of her that carries on after she is gone.[[1]](#footnote-1) That’s the bond of love that God has for us, and that we are called to have for each other, in the two greatest commandments identified by Jesus: to love God and neighbour.

Our second Scripture passage for this morning from Luke 4 seems at first glance to be a story about a lack of love, as Jesus experiences a downright hostile crowd in his hometown. Here we have Jesus returning to Nazareth to go to the synagogue in which he grew up. He even has the honour of reading Scripture and giving a short message, it seems. And he chooses Isaiah 61:1. At first, the faith community is very welcoming and proud of the young man they all helped raise. After Jesus has read the Scripture, they “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is this not Joseph’s son?’” (Luke 4:22). In other words, this is the son of our town carpenter? And he’s now such a good public speaker! What a great guy! But when Jesus continues interpreting the Scripture for them, and explaining how it is fulfilled today, they are suddenly enraged – even violently so! The congregation becomes an angry mob and they chase him out of the synagogue, out of the town of Nazareth, to the top of a hill, threatening to throw him off the cliff. But before they can follow through on this violent impulse, Jesus calmly walks away.

So what exactly is going on here? What does Jesus say in between that drives the congregation from pride to violent rage? I need to know, so I don’t accidentally recreate those conditions here! Well, as I see it – and it took me a good part of the week to figure out how our two Scripture passages for this week fit together – as I see it, Jesus was in fact speaking about love. He was! But he was speaking of it in a way that challenged the conventional understandings of his community.

If we look at the passage which Jesus reads from Isaiah, it’s all about love in the form of service or social justice or peacemaking. He speaks about bringing good news to the poor, about the release of prisoners, about bringing sight to those who cannot see and freedom to the oppressed and proclaiming the year of God’s favour (Luke 4:18-19; Isa. 61:1). This is precisely the love we as people of faith are called to extend to those who are among the “least of these” as Jesus puts it elsewhere, in Matthew 25. And the people of that synagogue in Nazareth seem to be on board so far. They believe in social justice, sure, which is the love of neighbour which we are called to in the Torah or the Law of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the care for the widows and orphans which so many of the biblical prophets speak about. So far so good.

But then Jesus takes it a step further, and this seems to be a step too far for the people. He gives two examples of times when God sent prophets not to Israelites who were in need, but to Gentiles in need – specifically, he speaks of the prophet Elijah visiting a Canaanite widow during a famine, and the prophet Elisha healing a Syrian man who had leprosy. I take this to mean that Jesus was challenging his hometown congregation to not just help other Israelites who were in need, but to also care for those beyond their ethnic group who were in need – the least of the least, those marginalized in multiple ways, by poverty as well as cultural identity. And this message does not go over well. The people grow angry with Jesus for challenging their assumptions about social justice and how far their love is to extend as people of faith. He challenges their assumptions about which neighbours exactly are “worthy” of their love (similar to a certain parable about a Good Samaritan – Luke 10). And they will have none of it!

But imagine this reaction today to a message of social justice in the church. It’s as if our service group were to share at the front of the church about the new things we are learning, and we would run them out of the church! Or as if the congregation grew enraged at the refugee committee for not sponsoring only Mennonite refugees! Or as if the adult ed. committee was shut down for its current series on organizations making change in Saskatoon, because that challenged too many assumptions, and took us too far out of our comfort zones! Luckily, we don’t seem to be on the verge of driving anyone to the edge of a cliff in this congregation.

Interestingly, though, this wasn’t always the case in the Mennonite church! Back when Mennonites lived in self-sufficient villages that were more closed off from the rest of society, there were certain supports put in place to help those in need, but only those within the German-Mennonite community. I’m thinking here of the old practice of the Mennonite “Weisenamt,” which gave financial assistance to the widows and orphans of the village. Or if you think of Mennonite Central Committee, which started in 1920 – 100 years ago next year! – which likewise had its origins in efforts to help the Mennonites who had remained in the Ukraine and were in need of food, and quickly moved beyond that narrow understanding of who our neighbour is. It moved from only helping other Mennonites to helping many people of all different religious and cultural backgrounds, to helping people help themselves. And today MCC has partners all over the world.[[2]](#footnote-2)

So what is love? Have we determined the answer to that question yet? Love, in the end, is central to our identity and practice as people of faith. We who follow a God who is Love are called to first of all love God and neighbour. We are called to both the love of our families and friends, the love of those people in our closest relationships, as well as particular care for “the least of these” – the love of social justice and peace. All those centuries ago, the apostle Paul wrote to a troubled community just starting to figure out what it meant to be the church, he encouraged them with these words to guide them on their way: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13). In other words, it all boils down to John the Beloved Disciple’s last words which we heard in our wonderful children’s story this morning: “little children, love one another.” Amen.

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5j7-\_rJ1Lc [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The origin story of MCC can be found here: https://mcccanada.ca/stories/tractors-ukraine-origins-mcc [↑](#footnote-ref-2)