

“Yes, we express our love...and we act in love.”

Sixth sermon in nine-week “Yes, And...” series: Passion + Humility
Yes, you feel what you feel...and you can practice humility.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (NRSV)

I’m sure you’ve heard the news that *Sweethearts Conversation Hearts*, a candy America loved (or loved to hate), won’t be in stores for this Valentine’s Day. Its maker, the New England Confectionary Company (NECCO), once the longest continuously operating candy company in the country, was sold in a bankruptcy auction in May. As one reporter put it, *“After 116 years as America’s confectionery currency of affection, Sweethearts are no more. LUV U. RIP.”*¹

As candies go, Sweethearts were less than delicious in my opinion; chalky, dusty, and unidentifiable flavors. But they weren’t known for their flavor, they were known for their 1-2 word messages: LOVE YOU. HUG ME. SMILE.

Sweethearts actually trace their lineage to Massachusetts in the 1860s. At the time, lozenges were a popular way to deliver medicine, but they were

exhausting to produce. A Boston pharmacist, Oliver Chase, invented a machine that streamlined the process by rolling the medicine concoction and pressing it into discs. He soon moved into the confectionery business, and in 1866 his brother Daniel started printing messages on the candy.

Sweethearts originally were larger and came in a variety of shapes: baseballs, postcards, watches. Some of their early sentiments were surprisingly direct, with messages such as, *“How long shall I have to wait? Please be considerate.”*

Later iterations spoke to love’s fickle nature and its stranger compulsions, according to Smithsonian.com: *“Married in satin, marriage will not be lasting”* and *“Please send a lock of your hair by return mail.”* But the candy as we know was born in 1902, when it assumed its heart shape, and the simple messages that would

¹ Taylor Telford, “RIP Sweethearts, a candy America loved (or loved to hate),” *The Washington Post – Business* (Feb. 8, 2019), accessed on Feb. 10, 2019 at https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/02/08/rip-sweethearts-candy-america-loved-or-loved-hate/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-business%3Arip-sweethearts-candy-america-loved-or-loved-hate%3Ahomepage%2Ft%3Arip-sweethearts-candy-america-loved-or-loved-hate&utm_term=.88df638ccfdb.

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stand the test of time: MARRY ME. BE MINE. KISS ME.²

Candy conversation hearts are not the definition of romantic love; even if they are sweet symbols of it. Similarly, despite what many couples believe when they choose it for their wedding, 1 Corinthians 13 is not the definition of romantic love either; did you know? If couples want scripture about romantic love they're better off reading from Song of Songs: *"Listen! My beloved! Behold he is coming, climbing on the mountains, leaping on the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag,"* (2:8-9) and *"How beautiful you are, my darling, your eyes are like doves behind your veil,"* (4:1). And that's not even the juicy stuff!

1 Corinthians is not a recipe for romantic love, it's an antidote to division and discord. It's not for a couple; it's for a community. Of course, couples will encounter discord in their marriages, and thus it's not irrelevant. It's just that the end result of reading 1 Corinthians 13 shouldn't just be two people gazing lovey-dovey at themselves; rather this text

should call us to gaze out at others...others who are different than us in every way but who all bear the divine image and imprint nonetheless.

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul declares love as the greatest power in a community that seems to be lacking a lot of it.³ He's not quite as succinct as candy conversation hearts, but he is just as direct.

Unlike a marriage vow moment, Paul does not introduce this passage to affirm an ethic already present in the community. He presents this passage as a way to introduce into the community an ethic that is absolutely necessary if they are to survive the muddy waters of difference and disagreement that is inevitable in any community.⁴

And remember, lest we think it was "easier for them back then," the Corinthian Church was not a homogenous body. This was not a comfortable gathering where people fell into step with each other because they shared fundamentally similar lives, values, and experiences. Quite the opposite is true.

² Telford, *ibid.*

³ Shively Smith, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13," *Working Preacher* (May 1, 2016), accessed on Feb. 10, 2019 at

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2595.

⁴ Smith, *ibid.*

The Corinthian fellowship crossed social boundaries of ethnicity, gender, age, rank, status, and life situation. There are married and unmarried men and women as well as widows and children among them (1 Corin. 7:8, 14, 32-40). While most of its members are converted Gentiles (1 Corin. 12:2), this body also includes Jews (1 Corin. 1:23-24). In fact, some of these Jewish members were rather powerful figures who served as former synagogue leaders, like Crispus (1 Corin. 1:14; cf. Acts 18:8) and Sosthenes (1 Corin. 1:1; cf. Acts 18:17).

Most of its members were from the lower classes (1 Corin. 1:26), but some sat on the opposite side in rank and resources. Erastus, for example, was the city treasurer of Corinth and Gaius had enough resources to support Paul and the whole church (1 Corin. 1:14; cf. Romans 16:23). There are slaves and free people in the community (1 Corin. 12:13) as well as people with different skill sets and gifts (1 Corin. 12:28-30).⁵

The diversity within the church of Corinth generated both

benefits and challenges common for any social group. Unfortunately, the challenges were swallowing any hope at them experiencing the gifts of diversity. The Corinthians were dissolving into discord (1 Corin. 1:10) and rivalry (1 Corin. 3:4, 21-23). Members divided into contentious groups. They took sides with some saying they are of one teacher or another (1 Corin. 1:12; 11:18-19). This was a community fragmented, rather than enriched, by difference.⁶

It was a community that perhaps was “Open to All Closed to None” on paper...but not in actuality. Each group within the community was open to itself and closed to anyone who thought differently or believed differently or disagreed with them. Yet, Paul remains firm that diversity is nonnegotiable. God has called this community to be diverse and to get along within it.

Again, Paul’s “ode to love” was not written to celebrate the unifying love already accomplished in the community.⁷ It was a call to action. It was not a tribute to what is. It was an intervention

⁵ Smith, *ibid.* Including above paragraphs.

⁶ Smith, *ibid.*

⁷ Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 275.

to instruct them on what had not yet come to pass.⁸

Paul could have just said “*All you need is love*,” but Paul did not intend the language of 1 Corinthians to be easily digested. The point was not to make its readers feel comfortable and affirmed in love. The point was to create cognitive dissonance...and to have them question what they thought love was. He wanted them to listen to what he said when he described love, and then look at their behaviors and lives and say – do these two things match? Although aesthetically beautiful in the way it reads and sounds, the ode is meant to motivate a new action plan, not just to be read at weddings.

In his tribute to love, Paul starts out by naming human achievement as temporary and limited (1 Corin. 13:1-3, 8-12).² Up until this point in the letter, much of Paul’s discussion about speaking in tongues, prophesy, knowledge, and insight has affirmed these as ingredients of the Christian worship and life. Paul spends an enormous amount of time describing these achievements

and gifts as necessary and desirable (1 Corin. 12:27ff). Many gifts, one spirit – all are the body of Christ.

In chapter 13, Paul makes a decisive shift, diminishing the allure of spiritual gifts and roles. Tongues, prophesy, knowledge, miracles, servanthood are important, but they still do not qualify as the “*more excellent way*” (1 Corin. 12:31). Love is the key. And love is what they are missing.

In the Greek, instead of that verse being translated as “*love is the more excellent way*” a better translation is “*love is beyond measuring*”⁹...and all the Corinthian people had been doing was measuring themselves against one another...who was better, who was stronger, who was right, who was more gifted, etc. They were kind of obsessed with it. It was a competitive society – when someone was right it meant that someone else had to be wrong, when someone was gifted it meant that someone else couldn’t have that gift – it was all passion and no humility (and misdirected passion at that!) Sound familiar?

⁸ Smith, *ibid*.

⁹ Brian Peterson, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13,” *Working Preacher* (Jan. 31, 2016), accessed on Feb. 10, 2019 at

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2734.

Paul underscores the primacy of love in 1 Corinthians 13 because it is the spiritual resource the Corinthians lack the most. And so he goes into detail tell them what it IS and what it ISN'T. I wish all scripture passages were this clear! But the reason he needs to do this, especially in our English language, is because love is such an illusive word. It fits so many scenarios. I can say I love yoga, I love pizza, and I love Damon (my husband)...and hopefully those aren't all the same kinds of love!

So Paul dives in to really explain what he means by love and he describes "the work of love" in both positive and negative terms. On the positive side, Paul says love is: patient, kind, and selfless. It involves truth-telling, fortitude, constancy, and tolerance (1 Corinthians 13:4-5,7).

In terms of what love "is not," Paul says it is not self-seeking, short-tempered, and offensive. In other words, love does not hurt people. It does not damage prospects for authentic community. Love does not impede affirmation of another's humanity. Love is the only means by which believers have

a chance to live fully in the knowledge and fellowship of God. All other spiritual gifts and human achievements provide limited access to that reality (1 Corinthians 13:8-12).¹⁰ Everything else will come to an end. Not love. Other things only help us see and know "in part"...love helps us see in full because it's how we are seen fully by God – not by our gifts...by God's love for us.

*As one pastor says, "Make no mistake. The love Paul is talking about here is not passive and fluffy. This kind of love is an up at dawn, feet on the ground, tools in hand, working kind of love. It builds communities. It nurtures positive social interactions, and not just social networks (which many of us have come to prefer). Paul's declaration of love unifies...Love transcends our self-imposed caste systems and personal biases. It forms whole and holistic people, who are anchored in the well-being of others. Love will not let us down if we genuinely live in it together (1 Corin.16:14)."*¹¹

It is in the difficult realities of relationships and communities that the love described by Paul needs to be lived out in costly ways...to our pride and to our

¹⁰ Smith, *ibid.*

¹¹ Smith, *ibid.*

own “success” by the world’s standards.

In verses 4-8a, “love” is the subject of 16 verbs in a row; it happens in every phrase. That may not come through clearly in English translations, where love is described by some rather static adjectives (“love is patient, love is kind”). Instead, Paul’s claims are that love “*shows patience*” and “*acts with kindness*.” Here, love is a busy, active thing that never ceases to work. It is always finding ways to express itself for the good of others. The point is not a flowery description of what love “is” in some abstract and theoretical sense, but of what love does, and especially what love does to and for others.¹²

One way for us to think about this today as Calvary (rather than as Corinth) is that because of our disordered assumptions about what love actually is, we often act as though the mission of the church is to gather like-minded and likeable people together. We think that in such a community it will be easy for us to love or, more honestly, to “feel the love.” But true love in community is not measured by

how good it makes us feel.” In the context of 1 Corinthians, it would be better to say that the measure of love is its capacity for tension and disagreement without division or shame or pointing fingers.¹³ Can we listen and learn to what God is telling us through others?

The truth is, we are no strangers to the kind of division in communities of which Paul speaks -- racial, denominational (just look at how many flavors of Baptist there are!), and political. And our strategies for negotiating these divisions leave much to be desired. It often comes down to choosing sides, as if the spectrum between the two poles did not exist. It would be better if we *only* chose sides. Instead, so often, we choose which side we are on and then, to make ourselves feel better or justified about our decision, we proceed to suspect, demonize, and tear down the other side. But as Father Elias Chacour (an advocate for non-violence, working toward reconciliation between Arabs and Jews) says, “*The one who is wrong is the one who says ‘I am right.’*”¹⁴

¹² Peterson, *ibid.*

¹³ Krister Stendahl, “Preaching from the Pauline Epistles,” in *Biblical Preaching: An Expositor’s Treasury* (Westminster, 1983), pp. 306-326).

¹⁴ Karoline Lewis, “Love Never Ends,” *Working Preacher* (Jan. 24, 2016), accessed on Feb. 10, 2019 at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4249>.

Sometimes we forget just how divisive the gospel can be...because it's hard. And because it's hard we end up sugar coating its message like a candy heart and putting our slogans of faith on it...slogans that match more of our culture and our priorities than those of Christ. As one pastor says, *"Choosing regard over rejection, respect over diminution, love over hate, peace over conflict is not as easy as we hope it could be, as we wish it would be. It seems like it should be easy -- and that's the problem. Why is it that we find it so difficult to make what appears to be a rather obvious choice? A choice for love? What stands in our way? What is at stake for us that we are reluctant to admit or to say out loud?"*¹⁵

Persian poet, Rumi, said, *"Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it."* You see, I think what stands in the way of love isn't others. It's not that others are unloveable. It's that our pride keeps us from loving others because we are so conditioned to be right, to do right, to not mess up. And we're human. So of course we're going to not be right

sometimes and not do right all the time...we're going to mess up. But because "we can't admit our humanness and humility let others see this or know this" – we them down instead. We pull away. Those barriers, while they do separate us from others...they are really separating us from ourselves...and from our ability to see and experience God's love for us.

In thinking about Paul's words about love, and how it is the key to the Christian life, even moreso than faith (if we take 1 Corin. 13:13 to be true) – I'm struck by the profound meaning of love being stronger than faith or hope. And I'm struck by it because you can have faith on your own without any challenge from others. You can have hope on your own. You can sit in your house protected from the outside world and have faith and hope and formulate the most perfect belief system. It's an introverts dream. (I should know, I am one!)

Love is not like that. Love requires that we be in relationship with others. It requires us to break down barriers within ourselves too. And that's why it's the hardest,

¹⁵ Lewis, *ibid.*

I think. And the messiest. And the most rewarding and life-giving.

What Paul knows and is trying to help the Corinthians discover for themselves is that if they put in the work to love, if they humble themselves and put others first and don't assume that they are the best or know what's best, then they will come to understand this gift of love. Because it's not just the gift of a warm and fuzzy feeling – it's the gift of being seen and respected and seeing others and respecting others in return. Paul literally says that you can know all you want and you can have all of the faith you want – but without love it's nothing. Think about that! Paul is really giving so much power to love. I think he got that from Jesus. Maybe even from the greatest commandment: to love God and love others.

If we say all the right things and believe all the right things and study all the right things and volunteer for all the right things and do all the right things – it doesn't make a lick of difference if those things are not anchored in love...and not just the idea of love but the sweat-equity proof of love. When Jesus talks about love –

it's as an action. And that's how he lives love too.

My friend and colleague, Chris Aho, had a great reflection on this passage this week. He wrote:

“I stood in the chancel with the bride and groom. The moment's significance was infused with the Spirit's presence as we turned to the most familiar of wedding scriptures: *'Love is patient; love is kind; etc...'* My homily encouraged the couple to nurture their love, etc...etc...The ceremony was beautiful. The love was tangible. All in attendance were filled with joy, at least until the reception.

The reception was great. The food was excellent. The DJ was on point. The first dance choices were entertaining, and the cake was worth the wait. The problem was, only the couple carried love beyond the church sanctuary. I surveyed the reception hall, and I noticed a table of church members that identify as liberal. At the next table, I spotted the more conservative crowd. And even at our table, the one with the minister and the organist, we avoided religion, politics, and church business so as not to offend anyone.

Of course, a wedding reception is not the place for debates about partisan issues, church personnel matters, or the decorating

committee's recommendation about carpeting, but the thing I noticed was that the table makeup at this reception hall mirrored the table makeup in the fellowship hall on Wednesday night. Everyone choose a safe table where it was easiest to love..."¹⁶

Maybe love means not choosing the safe table. Maybe love is about choosing the "table" where you feel you will be most in the minority in some way...because that is humbling...and everything in Paul's passionate passage about love points to humility. And we can't experience humility when we are in our comfort zones...*humility* is critical to spiritual growth. And to love.

This Valentine's week, I hope you have a chance to express something romantic to someone you love – a partner or spouse or significant other...or maybe a word of love to family or a word of appreciation to a friend...or even just spend time cuddling with a furry friend. That is so important – especially a in a world where hate seems to be the dominant rhetoric. A little lovey-dovey can always do us good. I think you all will do this naturally. What I'd like to challenge you to do this Valentine's week is

to also focus on the kind of love Paul is describing in 1 Corinthians 13. Ask yourself this question: **What area in my life could I use some humility?**

This requires a lot of vulnerability and honesty. But really think about it. And admit it to yourself. What is an area of my life where I really don't like to be wrong or where I'm always striving to be the best? Or what is a subject in my life where when I hear certain words – they are triggers for me and I shut down. Where in my life can I slow down and soften into some humility about something that I am so passionate about and think I already know so much about?

And here's one way to work on this once you've answered that question honesty for yourself:

Listen to the words that come out of your mouth. And the words that you *think* but maybe don't say.

Observe how you react and behave...when you jump in too quickly and when you withdraw.

¹⁶ Chris Aho, "All We Need is Love," *Center for Healthy Churches* (Feb. 5, 2019), accessed on Feb. 10,

2019 at <https://mailchi.mp/healthy-churches/all-we-need-is-love?e=7650abbd0a>.

Visualize a person you disagree with or a position you disagree with...and imagine responding in a different way. Envision what it would be like to *not* insist on your own way.

Encourage yourself. You can do this. Love yourself. God loves you. God doesn't require perfection; God requires love.

L.O.V.E.

Listen Observe
Visualize Encourage

It's short enough to fit on a candy heart and easy enough to remember to help you slow down and practice the kind of love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians...the kind of love that is the *only* antidote to fear, hate, discord, and pride.

As we close, turn to the cover image on your Order of Worship:



Guess what!? No need to run to Hallmark before Thursday. You've got a couple of free Valentine's here. Think of it like a take home craft; cut out

the hearts and mount them on construction paper if you like.

As for the sweet confectionary heart – give that to someone you love and care about...it's so important to tell people in our life that we care about them...and it'll bring some levity and maybe some nostalgia to their day.

As for the Corinthian heart – keep that one for yourself. Love yourself enough to really take love seriously. And use this Valentine as a reminder of just how much God loves you and just how much God requires of you in community...we are commanded to love. We don't like to think of it that way – because it's not very sexy or sentimental– but we are *commanded* to love. Are we answering that commandment? Are we living into this invitation that will really change our lives and the world?

One of these Valentines is cute and romantic. The other one is quite comprehensive and requires something of you...it is Scripture after all, not just sugary sentiments, but it can be just as sweet....and in the end, much more satisfying and sustaining.

Amen.