

## “Love Is”

I Corinthians 13

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With the passage from I Corinthians 13 tumbling around in me this week, the Apostle Paul writing about love, I had an email appear in my Inbox – the subject line was “What Is Love?” Really?!, I thought – how interesting for that email to show up this week. Now I realize there could be all sorts of spam emails with that subject line which could have content that would not be helpful material at all – but this one was legit and fortunately made it through the spam filter – it came from the website CarePages, which I know some of you are familiar with, and it was highlighting a recent book, titled simply “Love” The book tells about a one-woman research project by Karen Porter Sorenson – she spent 7 years in New York City running a ‘love research booth’, which, again, could sound quite sketchy – but it was just a simple table and chairs where she invited people to sit with her for a moment and respond to the question, “What is Love?” I’m not going to go into all of what she heard – as you can imagine there were quite a variety of responses – you can get the book if you want to (just in time for Valentine’s Day!).

I thought the love-research question seemed a fitting one for us today. “What is Love?” – it’s what 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 seems to be asking and expressing an answer to - what Love is – but I think it may help to have some clarity first about what the question is. What are we asking about when we say “what is Love?” At the end of the chapter Paul says that ‘faith, hope, and love abide’ – those are the big 3, the essentials when all else is peeled away – but can you just imagine the variety of responses we would get if we asked one another to define those words – faith, hope, love? What if we did our own research project in Holland asking family, friends, neighbors – our own research booth in Centennial Park or at 8<sup>th</sup> Street & College Ave (pretty similar to Central Park or Times Square)? You would most certainly hear a wide variety of ideas about faith, hope, and love. And I’m sure it would be an interesting spectrum of ideas to hear – but for me just imagining that variety points out the challenge of talking about such things together: when we consider essential, profound words like faith, hope, and love, we may be using the same words, but people often are thinking, feeling, meaning very different things as they do so.

And love is a prime example – think of all the ways we use the word love: you can love things and love ideas and love animals and love persons and love God; the same word is used to say you love French fries or love the Creator of the Universe; you can mean love as an expression of friendship, of family – love can be affection, it can be sexual, it can be commitment, it can be loyalty - love can express tenderness, or passion (for a person or for Hope beating Calvin). Love can be romance and love can be spiritual; love can be a noun and love can be a verb. To misuse the Apostle Paul’s wording, it’s not just that love never ends, it’s that the meanings we use for love seem to be never-ending...it makes it a challenge to ask or answer ‘what is love?’ very clearly.

That's the way it is in English – but in Greek, the language of the New Testament - you find something different with the word love – because in Greek, there are different words used for love, and that actually helps to sort some things out. In Greek there is the word EROS for love – which is love that is romantic, sexual, passionate, even erratic - love that satisfies a need; in Greek there is the word PHILOS for love – it is love that is mutual, friendship, family – Philadelphia, the city of brotherly-love; and then in Greek there is the word AGAPE for love – and AGAPE is, well, it's a very challenging word to define – it's a word that has something to do with love as a giving of the self...and AGAPE is the word for love that we need to explore. AGAPE is the word used in I Corinthians 13 that is translated as love, and AGAPE is the word for love wherever we find it connected to faith in God and a faithful life as a child of God.

So, I'm going to switch back to just using the word love – but with AGAPE being the word we are talking about...in order to ask, what is love? And what seems at the heart of that question to me is to wonder, what does it mean for God to love me? And for me to love God? (...I don't mean it to be just about me – I'm asking that about each of you also – and communally as well...but there is something about putting it in those personal terms: what is it for God to love me; for me to love God?) And what's very interesting in I Corinthians, is that Paul doesn't talk about anyone loving anyone else: the word God is not in the chapter – no mention of God loving me/you/us – no mention of me/you/us loving God. Instead, Paul talks about love itself – love as having it's own substance – love it's own reality – **Love is** – love has its own being to it.

And I wonder if part of Paul's wisdom in that, is pointing us to the truth of love not so much as something we create, manufacture, feel, do – but Love as a reality that we join into – Love a reality already present that we recognize, see ourselves abiding in, understand as the reality in which we exist. I think that's important, because it was actually a bit unsettling to me to realize how difficult it was for me to answer what does it mean for God to love me – for me to Love God...? Those are words and ideas that have been present throughout my life...but what is it really for God to love me – for me to love God...? I don't think I've realized just how much of an obstacle all the meanings of love in our culture have placed in me – how tangled up and hard to unravel that is...it seems odd to me to associate all of that with God's love for me and my love for God. I think I can even end up feeling uncomfortable saying that: 'I love God'; be uncertain of what it means to say: 'God loves me'. I hope you can sense some of what I'm getting at – I didn't like the discomfort of that –it was unsettling to me.

So in the midst of all that – Paul says...Love is... Love is all the things he describes so beautifully and powerfully – it is a substance, a truth that IS – which points to this: What does it mean for God to love me/you/us/this world? It is the reality of the relationship that God has with this world, and is even more the reality of who God is...God gives of God's self to this world – and God does so in the truth that in that giving is the very fullness of who God is; God empties something

of God's self, in the truth that such emptying never depletes who God is but in fact reveals the essence of who God is; God brings into being and commits God's self to a relationship with humanity, with you, with me, with creation...and that relationship is called love – and it is the tangible substance of life and reality itself. It is the substance of AGAPE. God gives God's self to this world – to me – to you. God loves you – it is the fullness of who God is – God is love.

A mysterious substance – once given from God, it calls out the same in those to whom it is given. What is it for me to love God? I entrust myself to God – give my life to God – I abide in the wisdom that God's ways are the ways of life; I give of myself to find the fullness of who I am in relationship to God - I love God. And, mysterious substance that it is, it works the same way between all of us. We entrust our lives to one another – to this world – in the truth that love is the power and substance of life that cannot be depleted, but is life and reality itself.

That's something of what AGAPE is – love is. But I learned something this week about AGAPE as the substance of love – my understanding of AGAPE in the past was that it was always used in a positive sense for the word love – but I discovered this week that the Bible also uses the word AGAPE when someone entrusts their life to something deadly...when I give my life to the powers of this world, to power over others, to having and holding only for me and not for others. Those are ways that call out for our love as well, our lives, our substance – but it is a hollow call that returns emptiness rather than fullness.

So as we wonder about love - the beauty and power of what Paul offers to us in the poetry of I Corinthians 13 is not only that love is, but to see that love has completeness only with God. There are so many things that want to claim the substance of, define the relationship and core of our lives, but the truth is only this: God loves you; God loves this world; you love God; this world finds its fullness in a relationship of love with God.

This is the feast of love – nourishing us to receive and live out the substance of God's love with one other and God's world. It is the only feast that will never end. AMEN.