

## THE HEART OF COMMUNITY: LOVE

### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-8A, 13; 1 JOHN 4:7-12

We're continuing our series on community. And I'm going to keep reminding you each we, because we need to hear it over and over. We were created for.... community. Why? Because God himself is.... community. Sin always leads to isolation, away from God and away from others. But in Christ we've been brought into fellowship with God and others to together as his people reflect who God is to the world around us.

I grew up in a pretty traditional Baptist church, probably a lot like Mountainview was a number of years ago. We used to have a very structured service order, and at the front of the church was a piano on the left side and an organ on the right, and the song leader used to climb up the steps behind that huge pulpit and he'd announce the hymn number. Everyone please rise and we'll sing hymn #254, 254. And one of my favorite ones was when that minor key came in and we began "We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord..." And they'll know we are Christians by our..." Of course that was pretty modern for our church.

But this is exactly what Jesus says. That the primary way that we are going to reflect as God's people who God is to the world is by our love for each other. In John 13:35 Jesus says, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Pastor Mike talked about this several weeks ago from Hebrews 13:1 - "Let *philadelphia* continue." He quoted Lucian of Samosata, that critic of the early church that despised their ways: *Their founder persuaded them that they should be like brothers to one another. Therefore they despise their own privacy and view all their possessions as common property.*

But we struggle to love in this way. There are more fights in church league hockey in Canada than....

The last couple weeks we've been in 1 Cor. and we've been seeing a church in Corinth that was struggling to love. There were superiority and inferiority complexes, the church was fragmented. And into this situation Paul writes what is probably the most famous passage in Scripture. 1 Cor. 13 has been widely recognized as one of the most beautiful and poetic pieces of writing ever. It's been quoted at presidential inaugurations and royal funerals. It's been put on wedding invitations, framed and put on walls and engraved into jewelry.

But in context 1 Cor. 13 is a firm rebuke to the way the church in Corinth was acting and a sign directing the course to a new way of life. In the line of Paul's argument, there is a "most excellent way." A way that isn't just one of a number of spiritual gifts, but a whole way of life that is the only true mark of spiritual life in us. In context, Paul is saying that true spiritual life and maturity doesn't show itself in the practice of one or two particular gifts, but in a way of life that is governed, powered and propelled by love.

John makes this same argument in the passage in 1 John that we read:

*"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."*

In June 1967 400 million people around the world watched the first live, international satellite television production ever, called *Our World*. Countries from around the world were asked to make contributions to the program, and the show ended with the United Kingdom's contribution, a song performed by the Beatles. The Beatles had been asked specifically to come up with a song containing a simple message to be understood by all nationalities. The song they wrote? All you need is love. Went on to become #1 hit in both the UK and U.S.

The song gives the picture that you can do anything and be anything, all you need is love. And that is the picture that the world has around us of love. If we just learned to love the world would be a much better place. The problem is that we can't just decide to "do" love.

When we come to 1 Cor. 13 we need to recognize that Paul isn't just giving us a checklist of what we need to do. He doesn't say, "you must be patient, you must be kind. He takes a wholly different approach and says "love is patient, love is kind." He doesn't sit us down and say... now class, if we would just try a little harder, the world would be a better place... we can do it!" In fact, before we can "do" any of it, we must come face to face with love, we must be confronted by love. Paul says, "look at, look at love... not first "do" it, look at love. Before we do love we must see love. And there are three steps that we have to go through to become loving people. To become a loving community. For us to become a community that loves, that really and truly loves the way that Jesus is talking about in John 13 when he says that the world is going to know that we are his disciples, love must convict us; love must catch hold of us; and only then are we changed.

For us to become a community that truly loves, love must convict us, catch hold of us, change us.

#### 1. Love must convict us.

We first need to recognize that in ourselves we can never meet this standard of love. Look at v. 7, here's where Paul really comes to his climax. "*Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*" Paul uses this *all* intentionally. He uses it 8x in the passage. And he really could be saying it of all the characteristics of love. *Love is always patient and kind. Love never is arrogant or rude.* Which one of us can stand before that pattern of love? And finally in v. 8 *Love never ends*, or in some translations, *love never fails... it never gives up.*

Are there times when your love fails? When your love just gives up? Why? What I want to suggest is that the reason that our love fails, that our love gives up, that there is an end to our love, is that what I am loving is not actually the person, the object of my affection - my neighbor, my wife, my brother or sister in Christ - but what they bring me. Their affection, their acceptance, the feeling I get from their love.

Look back at v. 1. Paul uses this grammar pattern - "If I "do" these things, but I don't have love, it's worthless."

'If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels...'

'If I have prophetic powers and understand *all* mysteries and *all* knowledge'

'If I have faith to move mountains...'

'If I give away all I have...'

'If I deliver up my body to death...'

Paul is being intentionally hyperbolic here to prove his point. What he's saying is that it's possible to operate as powerfully in spiritual gifts as anyone in the church, and yet not love the church. That it's possible for me to give all that I have away to the poor, and yet not love the poor. That it's even possible for me to give my own body up to the flames, to be burned at the stake for God, and yet not love God.

Real love is not wanting the joy and happiness that someone brings you, but wanting their joy and happiness. So often, what we think is real love for another person is only really loving what we get from that person or what the relationship itself gives us. Serving someone we really think gives us nothing - but it's feeling ourselves to be a "fine chap". C.S. Lewis put it this way, he said, "Most of what people call love is really hunger." And so why does our love fail, why does our love give up? It gives up when we no longer get from them what they had been giving us.

Charles Spurgeon tells a story that captures this picture well. I've used this story once before so you may remember it:

*There once was a gardener who grew an enormous carrot. So he took it to his King and said, "My Lord, this is the greatest carrot I've ever grown or ever will grow. Therefore, I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." The King was touched and discerned the man's heart. So as he turned to go, the King said, "Wait! You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I own a plot of land right next to yours. I want to give it to you freely as a gift so you can garden it all." And the gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing.*

*But there was a nobleman at the King's court who overheard all this, and he said, "My! If that is what you get for a carrot—what if you gave the King something better?" So the next day the nobleman came before the king, and he was leading a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, "My Lord, I breed horses and this is the greatest horse I've ever bred or ever will breed. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." But the King discerned his heart and said, "Thank you." And he took the horse and merely dismissed him.*

*The nobleman was perplexed. So the King said, "Let me explain. That Gardener was giving me a carrot. But you were giving yourself a horse."*

We think we are loving other people, but we're actually just loving ourselves. We need to be convicted by love before we can be changed by it.

2. Before love can change us, love has to catch hold of us.

We've already said that Paul doesn't give us a checklist - he doesn't say - be more patient and kind, he says Love is patient and kind. He personifies love, gives it flesh and blood, and says - love is like this. Of course, for both the Corinthians and for us we see in this love, the God who is love.

The Bible tells us that God is love, but we must remember that, as much as our culture might like to tell us, love is not God. God declares that love is central to who he

is. In Exodus 34, when Moses meets God on Mt. Sinai, God descends in a cloud and the Bible says he declares to Moses his name. His name being everything about him, what is essential to who God is. And what does he say?

*“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands.”*

Steadfast love, *hesed*, the Hebrew word means God’s loyal love, his covenant love. A love ruthlessly committed to the joy and happiness of another. What stands out about God’s love is its utter freedom. As we’ve already seen, our love is constantly tainted with false motives. We seek to fill our needs in others. But God has no needs, and therefore is completely free to love us selflessly. His love isn’t hindered by loving us for selfish motives.

And God’s love is also self-originating. God loves us, not because of who we are, but because of who *he* is. His love isn’t based in any loveliness in the object of his affection, but in his own character of love.

But God’s love goes even beyond this, Love literally did take on flesh! God’s love toward us was shown supremely in the person of Jesus. 1 John 4 tells us that:

*“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”*

John says that it is in this one act - the sending of Jesus to be sin-bearing, wrath extinguishing sacrifice for us - was the love of God shown most clearly. Rom. 5:8 tells us the same thing - God demonstrates his own love for us in this....

As Tim Keller has said - Jesus death on the cross tells us that we are more sinful and depraved than we ever dared imagine, but we are more loved and welcomed than we ever dared hope. At the cross God’s love and justice meet. It’s at the cross that 1 Cor. 13:6 is manifest, *“Love doesn’t rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoice in the truth.”* That Ex. 34 is fulfilled - that God who keeps his steadfast love, his *hesed*, for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.” The guilty were not cleared. Because of his steadfast love, his loyal love for us, God sent his son to bear the punishment of the guilty that we might enjoy his forgiveness.

What can we speak of this love?

3. Ok - now go and be like Jesus....

That’s not enough. Resolution to be better, to love better, to love more selflessly, to love in a way that seeks the joy and happiness of another, resolution is not enough. We need to allow this love to change and shape us.

Look back at 1 Cor. 13:6 again. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Tim Keller has some wonderful insight into this verse. He says that this word rejoice with can mean to sing along with. Love sings along with the truth. And where do we find truth more fully expressed than in the gospel? Where do we learn to

love like Jesus loves? What place is our heart changed and shaped to be like God's heart of love? It is in the gospel. It is as we sing long with the gospel that we are changed to be like Jesus. There's an old hymn by Frederick Faber with a line similar - The music of the Gospel leads us home.

Most of you will remember the old joke about how to get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice. What do great singers do? They practice. Singing along with the gospel means daily we get into the habit of rehearsing and practicing the gospel. We've talked about this before, but what does this mean? It means that daily I need to preach to myself the truths of the gospel. That in the gospel I am more evil and wicked than I ever could have thought, but more cherished and loved than I could have ever hoped. That the cross says the worst thing about me that could ever be said, there's nothing worse that could ever be said about me than that the Son of God had to die for me. But it also says how accepted and valued I am.

If you haven't gotten yourself a copy of this little book, I think we might still have some on the shelf back there, you have to get one. This is a wonderful little book for this exact practice.

But do you know where the practice of rehearsing the gospel works itself out the best? Where God has designed it to function to its maximum levels? In community! You see, our own hearts are deceitful. They can falsely lift us up and just as deceitfully push us down. But when we surround ourselves with brothers and sisters who understand and are experiencing the power of the gospel in their own lives we become preachers to one another. This is what it means to be a gospel centered community.

Bonhoeffer - Life Together

*"God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of a brother, in the mouth of man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure.*

*The goal of all Christian community is to meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation."*

We are constantly reminding each other of the glory of the cross, of how it changes our values, the way we see ourselves and the way we see others. We remind each other of how in the gospel I'm accepted and loved and I don't have to seek that acceptance through other people. We remind each other that through the cross I've been exposed for the sinner that I am and no longer need to hide my struggles. We remind each other that because we've been exposed as sinners yet made perfect in Christ that there's no need to serve others just to get a pat on the back. We remind each other that God has provided everything we need for supreme joy and happiness and anything we find through others is secondary.

As we live in this type of community together, we get freed from people, for people. It is in this that Christian love becomes what it should be. You see, as we're changed by what Jesus has done for us we start to love like him.