

*Texts: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13*

*Subject: The Gift of Love*

*Theme: Contagious Love*

Sixth Sunday of Easter; May 17, 2020, Online Worship; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Risen Lord Jesus, Amen.

As we've been spending many hours online during this time of physical distancing, I was thinking about emoji's - they are the digital means to sharing feelings through texting and social media. There's a new one out now, in the last few weeks: the *care* emoji, which features a smiley face holding a heart. I suppose that it means you share a certain amount of connection with the thoughts or emotions reflected in a social media post. Maybe it has come to exist as a more appropriate response than the 'like' or 'sadness' emojis. There's the angry emoji, which could mean that I'm angry about a post, or angry at the one who posted it...it's confusing. Then, there's the 'love' emoji - signified by the heart. And rather than sharing loving feelings, or being moved to loving action, I think it's come to mean something closer to 'I strongly agree with this statement you've made online'. It's like when I see you post some bible verses online that resonate with my spirit, I'll make use of the 'love' button. When I see pictures of my siblings or my nieces and nephews online, I hit that 'heart' emoji. When someone shares a photo of a big plate of Buffalo Wings that always gets a love tap out of me.

Sharing love online is a strange thing, and has little resemblance to actually loving one another. It has very little to do with being 'in love' as we understand that. We know *love is an action*. It's a verb, it's something we do. Jesus' words to his friends in the Gospel of John share this, "For God so loved the world..." (3.16). "Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another" (13.34). "Those who love me will keep my

word” (14.23). “I have made your name known to them...so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (17:26). The love of God in Jesus is for a purpose, it comes from the Creator, and it does what it sets out to do. In love, the world is reconciled, brought back into loving, purposeful relationship with the one who truly *is* love.

*Ah, Love.* We *love* love. We all want to be loved. But I wonder sometimes, do we want to act in a loving manner? We want love, often we’d like to show love, but it’s much harder at times to actually *be* loving.

Many of us are familiar with this reading from the Apostle Paul. We’ve heard it at countless numbers of weddings - maybe you remember it from your own wedding. It’s a testimony to the power of love, and for a couple making their promises to one another it can be truly meaningful. However, that may not have been exactly what Paul had in mind when he penned this letter to the newly established church in Corinth. As we heard last week, this church is figuring out its identity, it has been pulled in different directions and displayed different allegiances. It’s been fractured and divided, but Paul the church planter calls them back to who they really are, reminding them that they are ALL one in Christ. They are called together to be the followers of Jesus, the one into which they were baptized. They are one body, with many members, different gifts, and called to serve one another in love.

So some of them are wise, that’s great. Others can speak in a language understood to come from heaven and still others can understand and decipher these words spoken in the power of the Spirit. Others are great teachers, some speak prophetically, several are generous, and many are deeply faithful. They are a diverse

group of human beings, from rich cultural backgrounds, with varied personalities, and different gifts. What can it be that will bind them together as one body? It's love.

Now, Paul wouldn't write this if they were displaying and acting in the love they had received in Jesus. He would not be admonishing them in this way if they were responding to the needs of the community in love, and sharing the love of God they had learned from Paul's sharing of the Gospel among them. They had *failed* to love one another, and so Paul writes to redirect their actions toward love personified - the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sure they meant well. They thought they were doing the right thing when they invited their friends to come and share a feast, to participate in the community of faith and enjoy one another's company. Yet, there were others who were left out. Some members held different status, were from different backgrounds, or had different teachers. There were some who were not considered worthy, or unable to join the feast, and their gifts were not welcomed.

We mean well, too. But our love falls short.

We hear Paul tell us what love is *not* and we recognize the ways we have been unloving - not just to the ones we live with, or in the relationships we choose or have been born into, but in the community of faith as well. We are often impatient, rude, envious, arrogant. We get irritable and resentful, and we insist on our own way. Knowing we are loved by God, and welcomed into love by the cross of Christ, we can admit this truth - we are often unloving and unloveable.

And most of the time, we get what we give.

When we think about love, when we hear these well used passages of scripture I want us to think about them in a different way. Paul reminds the church then and now that there *is* another way, another life, another love in the world. His name is Jesus, and if we read these words with new eyes, and minds, and hearts, we hear that truth expressed in a new way:

*Jesus* is patient; *Jesus* is kind; *Jesus* is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. *Jesus* does not insist on His own way; is not irritable or resentful; does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. *Jesus* bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Where we fall short, Jesus finds us. Where we have failed, Jesus has been victorious. Where our love is limited, Jesus' love is unconditional, unyielding, unending. We might be hard to love at times, or even *most of the time*. But we have been loved by the one who loved us to the cross, to the grave, and forms us in love.

The Word reminds us of who we are. This Living Word does what it says and *makes* us something new altogether - it makes us *loved* no matter what. This love calls us into a new way of being and a new understanding of what it means to be loving and to be love in the world, that lacks it most of the time.

We have seen love in these last few months, as we have made changes in our lives, and so many have sacrificed for the safety and care of vulnerable neighbors. We have shown love when we stayed home because we want to keep our elderly ones safe. We have gathered food for those unable to work or travel or receive benefits. We have washed hands, worn masks, and changed our practices, including worship, for the sake of those who might be at risk. As we continue to discuss and plan for future

gatherings, our actions will be determined by guidance from church leaders, science and statistics, and most of all, by love. This kind of love that puts the other first is not always easy, but it is contagious love. I caught it from ones who showed me, mentors, family members, teachers, preachers, and friends. They cared for me, sacrificed for me, and showed up when they were needed most. That love lives in me now, and in all of us through this Holy Spirit that shows up and guides us to places we never thought we'd find ourselves, with people we might never have known otherwise.

Our community of faith is in many ways like that church in Corinth. We are a diverse group. We are of different backgrounds, socially and economically, we have different tastes, different gifts, different perspectives. We do not all act the same, think the same, or want the same things. That is ok. No matter how varied we may be, we are gathered here by the same Spirit, and made into a worshipping community, formed and sent to show love in our world - to pass it on.

“Faith, hope and love abide.” They remain with us. And love is the greatest. Our faith is in God alone, the One who we cannot see, and yet we trust in the goodness of God, who is faithful to us. Our hope is in a future when we will see our Creator face to face. Ultimately, when we do finally find ourselves in God's presence, faith and hope will no longer be necessary, but love will always remain.

Each time we come to worship together, in person and online, we begin with this reminder: YOU are God's beloved. You are loved by God. No matter what else you do today - if you feed 200 people, if you write hymns and pray unceasingly, if you lose your temper, say some bad words, hurt someone, or steal a freight train, God loves you. That does not and will not change based on your behavior. This kind of powerful love, this

unconditional, steadfast, holy love is not given that it would be hoarded, but that it might be shared. And it is a highly *contagious love*. When we remember who we are, when we can be assured of the love we have been graciously given in Jesus, we know that we are freed from the kind of unloving self-judgement, that keeps us bound to fear and immobilizes us. We can move in the world to act in love for the sake of those who might feel unloved, who might not know their worth and value in the eyes of Jesus, our Lord. We share it in words and actions, by giving of our time and presence. We pass it on over time, and in time are transformed as well. This is the love of Jesus. It's greater than our failures, our best intentions, our worst moments, and our deepest regrets. It makes us who we are, it makes us children of God. Amen.