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St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of Holy Eucharist  
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany; February 3, 2019

## “Love Never Ends”

Scripture: I Corinthians 13:1-13 and Luke 4:21-30; 4 Epiphany C, RCL

*“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”*

But there's the trouble, isn't it? If one checks those most reliable and scholarly of “love reports”... you know, the ones that you find at the supermarket check-out line or the local magazine rack, like *People Magazine*, *Us*, *Star*, *The National Enquirer* --- then you have to believe that love is ending all the time. And for some people it seems to be beginning all the time too, but it's certainly not enduring all things, okay. But you don't have to go to the tabloids to understand that. All of us know of circumstances in someone's life, maybe in our own, where love has been a fleeting thing, where it has, in fact, come to an end. Perhaps. Maybe. We think.

You know, despite what I gather most people would think, Paul did not write the words in First Corinthians in order that they could be read incessantly at weddings. This is not the official text for Christian nuptials (although it is a good one). But, actually, Paul had no such thing on his mind. For these words were not

written for a couple about to pledge their unending troth. They were written to a family in distress. They were written to a church, a gathering of the faithful in the city of Corinth, to people who had come together because they believed in Jesus; they were written to a community not necessarily unlike our own. And in this community, people were in conflict with one another. They were fighting over who amongst them were the most faithful, who were acting most like good Christians, they were fighting over who God appreciated over and above all the others. There were factions and parties, people vying for leadership and authority, people claiming their faithfulness as right over and against the lack of faithfulness in others. And this in a community supposedly of love. And through all the noise, all the clamor, all the bitter words, all the recriminations and insults and slander, all the claims of power and righteousness, Paul quietly cuts directly to the heart of the matter with what can only be described as a love song:

*“Though I speak with the tongues of mortals and of angels but do not have love, I am but 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 have not love, I am nothing.”*

Without love, none of the rest of things matters: Who is right, who is wrong, who is certain, who is in doubt, who knows everything, who has sacrificed most, who has

injured, who has been injured. Love doesn't dwell upon these things; it seeks to grow beyond them, to find a deeper foundation upon which to stand.

But I'm not surprised by this outburst in Corinth of anger and animosity and quarreling, nor am I surprised by Paul's outburst of wisdom and his challenge for new understanding. In my life and in my vocation, I often observe that love sometimes can be the hardest to understand at home, in the most familiar of circumstances, with the most familiar of people. Some of you have heard me say that "...we step upon the feet of those with whom we dance most often and most closely." It's true. The ones we love most are often the ones to whom we are close enough to cause pain and difficulty, though we may not intend it. And they are often the ones close enough to help us bear our pain. But intimacy can breed peculiar desires, visions of what we want things to be in those we love, rather than love which receives them as they are. In Corinth the people were quite sure they had to be on one side or the other in order for God to love them. God loved them best, you see. But it was not so, and it is not so.

We can speak with the tongues of mortals and of angels, we can be certain that our way is right, we can do all the good things and shun all the "bad" people, we can boast of our goodness and assert that God is on our side, we can demand our way

and want it now! But love does none of these things. *“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.”*

But I didn't say this was easy for us. Even Jesus got into a bit of a tiff with the hometown folks when he told his family and friends the truth... that God loves others in the same way God loves them. That's why they are so up in arms and want to throw Jesus off a cliff. He tells them that God loves the foreigners too... the widow from Zarephath and the soldier from Syria, neither of them good and faithful Jews, yet God was with them anyway. It is not their righteousness that makes the difference; it is God's love. And that's the truth for all of us. So it sort of burst their bubble that day in Nazareth, I guess, to learn that God could love everyone, and that was too much for them to learn from that little upstart son of Joseph who grew up down the street from them. What could he know anyway?

Well, he knows what Paul knows. In fact, Jesus inspires Paul to compose his beautiful song of love. And Paul shares that song to bring peace to the Corinthian church. And more. Frankly, that song is, as I see it, the only way to bring peace to the world. Look around. Listen up. Is our contemporary discourse with our neighbors, our nation, or with other nations characterized first and foremost by patience? By

kindness? By humility and politeness? If it is not, then it is not how Jesus calls us to be. Paul shares his song to give us a shot at knowing love like God's love, love as something we all receive at God's hands, all of us. And that love is deeper than feeling good about somebody or something, and that love is not ultimately about being entirely comfortable and getting our way.

So here's something I take from these words of scripture this morning. Love. Be gentle within your families. Remember, you dance closely with one another. Expect to feel that mashed toe every once in a while, and expect even to do some of the mashing. I don't think that we can always prevent it. Don't be too surprised when you are hurt, because our feelings are vulnerable things. But be patient and kind for the healing. Believe, hope, and endure. The love of which Paul speaks, the love that never ends, is a gift of God, an attribute of God. It's God's work, and we can try to be partners with God in sharing it, in our families and in the world. You know, I don't think the job of the Christian is to be right. Our job is to love and love others as we God loves us.