

“An Earnest Desire for the Well-Being of Others”  
Deuteronomy 10:12-22; Psalm 31:21-24;  
1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13; John 13:31-35

August 13, 2017  
Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

We just read a whole bunch of verses about love, so I took a verse from our culture to offer as well. “What’s love got to do with it?” After all, “it’s just a second-hand emotion.” Isn’t that one of the ways that love is thought about? And if we’re not thinking of it simply as a second-hand emotion, perhaps we’re going to think about it by another song, by Nazareth, “Love Hurts.” Sometimes it feels like it burns. We go through the fire of love. It’s not always easy. Is it just that feeling, though? Is that what love is?

There are so many ways to think about love. We can think about it as that kind of love between a man and a woman. We can think about it as familial love. We can think about it as the loyalty or the love of friends or a group. But sometimes love is a little different.

Paul talks about it as the still more excellent way. If you recall all this conversation we’ve done this whole summer about the path we’re on, that we’re trying to live according to the Way, the Way of Christ. If that were all burnt away as dross, what would be left is that still more excellent way that Paul describes. He’s going to go on and describe a whole lot of things about that still more excellent way. We’ll get there, but before we go further with his description, what is love itself?

If you’ve been around here for a while, you have heard me try to describe it a number of times. Sometimes we describe it simply as the care of others, but I found this definition in a lexicon this week. It’s “an earnest and anxious desire for and an active and beneficent interest in the well-being of the other.” So it’s got that sense of feeling to it, of concern, of caring. It cares about what’s good for the other.

Now the thing that’s a little different about the agape form—the love that’s always talked about in scripture—is that it is a clear determinate of will and judgment; that is, we choose it. It’s something we have to choose to do. It’s not just a feeling we have. We choose to do it for some reason.

I think the word has in it the sense that we do it because we recognize the value and the worth of the other. And for us, that love is the love of all God’s children because we recognize all God’s children have value and worth.

So Paul goes on. I tried to go back and look at each term and how the Greek has a certain flavor to it on each one.

- It bears patiently all things
- It serves kindly in all things
- It does not burn with jealousy
- It does not show off

- It does not over-inflate oneself
- It does not act disgracefully
- It is not easily provoked and angered
- It does not keep account of wrongs
- It does not enjoy injustice
- It enjoys the grace of reality and of truth
- It keeps one together through all things
- It enables confidence through all things
- It maintains hope through all things
- It supports endurance through all things
- It does not fail

I think what Paul is suggesting is that as we choose the love God shows us, we become something different. These are descriptions, and perhaps they are aspirations, but they are descriptions of what we become as we recognize that we are called to be reflections of God's love. In 1 John 4:19, it says we love because God first loved us. We love, we recognize that the choice to love is given us because we have received that love from God and we are to be reflections of that love, to make that same choice to choose to care about others because they have value and worth, and to care about their well-being.

If that weren't enough, I think Jesus is pretty clear when he says, "Love one another even as I have loved you." It's a new commandment he gives us. Our society may struggle with whether love's got anything to do with it, but Jesus doesn't. Jesus is clear that love is central.

And as we recognize that Jesus and Paul invite us to the still more excellent way to love one another, I find it a humbling thing because I realize it's not about what I know. It's not about the way I can create things. It's not about me. It's about how God's love governs me. All this is pretty straightforward to talk about. We always read 1 Corinthians 13 as this wonderful description of love, but when it gets down to brass tacks, it's hard. Peter is a great example of that. He walked with Jesus. He loved Jesus, and yet when Peter was afraid, he denied Jesus. I think it points to human fear and how that human fear can make us do things that are despicable. Peter loathed himself shortly after what he had done. He recognized it. As we recognize our own fears and the ways it pushes us into places we don't think are right or think we should go, it can be so easy for us to have that same struggle.

It's one thing to talk about love in the abstract, but when we have to face the reality of hate, when we have to face the reality of division, when we have people choosing what I would call evil—one race over another—the call to love is real. It's one thing to decide that to get to the good, we have different opinions of how to get there. It's a different thing to say that evil is good. To say one race is better than another is evil. To ask for the subservience of some for a few is evil. To say that God's love is partial is

evil. God loves us all. So we have to stand together. Sometimes we stand in places of fear holding each other up, holding onto one another in the face of hatred.

We have lots of problems. We have all kinds of problems. We could go on and on with the problems we need to solve. Jesus lived in a time when there were lots of problems. They saw him as a problem and so what did they do? They killed him. You see, it feels to me that one of the ways that we try to deal with our problems is through violence. We break the bonds of human love and enable evil and hatred to become too real, and we think that violence will solve our problems. We have a God that's different from that. God loves all souls, cares for us all. Jesus doesn't invite us to love just a few. The Old Testament lesson says God loves the stranger and calls us to love the stranger as well; the stranger in ourselves, the stranger next to us, the stranger across the world from us.

I struggle with all this because, you know, there are lives in the balance right now—people I love. And people want to put more people's lives in the balance. God calls us to love one another, not to try to solve things by separating ourselves out, by making one group here and one group there, but by a love that covers it all.

As we went through that list of what love does and is, it's what holds us together. It's what gives us patience and kindness. It's what enables us to sustain our lives and it is the love we share to and for each other that enables us to sustain life. It is when we have mutual love for one another that we can make the world a better place because then we may not get our own way, but we can work out a way forward together. Scripture never says it's all about me anyway. It's not all about what I want.

When we work in mutual love, the world can be a better place. Love never fails. If we let hatred and division and evil have its way, we will know nothing but strife. We are called to love one another even as Jesus has loved us. Amen.