

Sermon Title: “The Greatest Thing”
Text: Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Preached At: Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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If you were here last Sunday, you will recall that our New Testament reading was from 1 Corinthians 12, and that it kind of left us hanging.

After Paul spends time comparing the human body to the body of Christ, and after he talks about how a diversity of gifts are necessary for the proper functioning of the body, chapter 12 concludes with “eagerly desire the greater gifts” and “now I will show you the most excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31).

Of course, chapter and verse divisions were not part of the original Greek text—1 Corinthians was a letter written to a church, not a collection of isolatable fragments to be read on their own. So on one level, the way in which chapter 12 ends is fairly arbitrary. But the chapters are there and readings have to end at *some* point, so that’s where we ended off last week.

And, if you were like me, you wanted to hear what came next.

Well, today we find out what the “more excellent way” is.

Love.

Well, that sounds... lovely...

... but “love” is one of those words that can very easily sound kind of “Christian-y”—like one of those things that you are sure is the right answer to the question, but is so overused and under-practiced that it can be practically meaningless.

I have a book on my shelf called *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*. It’s a book that talks about everything from food and pets to taxes and technology from a Christian perspective. Here’s how the entry on “love” begins:

*Love, a word much overused and under-defined today, is employed promiscuously of everything from cars to diapers to dog food and is largely equated with feelings. Love, the most crucial and central concept in Christian theology and ethics, is also one of the most theologically, ethically, psychologically, and culturally ambiguous.*¹

¹ Robert Banks & R. Paul Stevens, ed., *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 593.

I can't prove this, but my suspicion is that there has never been a culture where the word "love" is used as frequently and understood as poorly as our own. Listen to the radio or watch TV for an evening, if you have any doubts 😊.

The point cannot be made often enough. The kind of love Paul is talking about in our passage this morning has very little to do with how the word is used in the vast majority of popular discourse.

Remember who Paul is writing to and the context in which he is writing these words. He's not writing to star-crossed lovers looking for some inspiration for their wedding day. He's not providing some kind of timeless generic "religious" wisdom.

He is writing to a *church*—and a church that couldn't stop fighting and disagreeing with one another, a church where members took advantage of one another, where the poor were marginalized and mistreated—a church that was hardly a model of virtue and maturity.

To these people, Paul's command is quite simple: **love each other**.

There are a bunch of Greek words that we translate into English as "love." But the word for love that Paul uses is probably a fairly well known one: *agape*.

And as you may be aware, *agape* is distinguished from other Greek words for love primarily because of its self-sacrificing quality.

It is unconditional love that gives without expectation of anything in return. It is a *sacrificial* love that seeks the best for and in others, even at great cost to ourselves.

It is a *fundamentally self-giving love*.

This kind of love asks us to adopt a fundamentally self-giving posture with respect to those around us.

It asks us to see what is best in others rather than obsessing about their faults, to look for and encourage what God is doing in the lives of those who may not think exactly like we do, rather than measuring everyone around us by the extent to which they are like us or meet our needs.

It asks us prepare to be wronged—to put others ahead of ourselves even when we're convinced that we are in the right.

In sum: *agape love—Christ-like love—costs us something and it leads to benefit and blessing for others*.

1 Corinthians 13 is perhaps one of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture—but it is a sobering passage when we stop to really think about what it says.

If we do not love, Paul says, we have nothing. We gain nothing. We make a bit of noise for a brief moment of time, and that's it.

- all the knowledge in the world—all the carefully formulated doctrines and creeds of the church, all of the well-articulated theologies, all of the stimulating intellectual conversations... *nothing without love*
- the most brilliant charismatic style and ability to communicate... *nothing without love*
- all the social action and worthy causes we get behind... *nothing without love*
- all of the self-discipline we are able to work up... *nothing without love*
- all the money we can make and the prestige we can acquire.... *nothing without love*
- all the faith we can muster... *nothing without love.*

Not “less effective,” not “could use a bit of improvement,” not a decent start or a step in the right direction.” *Nothing.* Without love.

Everything we attach significance and worth to, everything we cling to for security and identity will pass away... *but love never fails.*

Love is the greatest thing of all. And it is not an optional component of the Christian life. Love is not just a nice ideal we should aspire to, or something we should at least say we admire. It's not something we should really get around to some day. It's not something for the “super-Christians.”

Love is who we are as followers of Jesus. Love is what life in the kingdom of God looks like.

So. We know that love is central to the Christian life and to the shape of Christian community. We even know a bit about what love is supposed to look like.

The question is: **Why isn't this kind of love more of a lived reality in our lives?**

On one level, the answer is easy and obvious. Because we're *human* and we aren't perfect. We would like to love better, but our sin and selfishness get in the way.

This is true. But I think I wonder if there is a deeper reason.

I wonder: **Do we trust love?** Do we believe that love really is the “greatest thing,” “the most excellent way?” Do we really believe that love is the point of this whole thing that we call faith, the whole point of the church?

Loving in a 1 Corinthians way can be risky, after all.

It is risky to exercise patience and kindness in a culture where everything is demanded *right now* and where we are suspicious of kindness as one more attempt to sell us something.

It is risky to refrain from arrogant boasting in a world where we are trained to sell ourselves, to stand out, to be noticed, where our livelihoods often depend on separating ourselves from the crowd.

It is risky not to insist on our own way when *everything* around us, from advertising to popular psychology screams, “You deserve it! Be yourself! Don’t let anybody get in your way of your dreams or stifle your individuality!”

It is risky to “keep no record of wrongs,” as the NIV translates verse 5, when keeping record of wrongs is often how we protect ourselves or gain an advantage over others.

And always trusting, always hoping, always persevering, always believing... these things *sound* good and admirable, but so often there are more attractive shortcuts that don’t involve so much of us that are all too easy to take.

Loving—in the *agape* sense of the word—is a gamble in a world where everything around us encourages us to look out for ourselves above all else.

Philosopher Dallas Willard puts it this way in his book, *Knowing Christ Today*:

*The dark truth is that we may praise love... We may wish to be loving—to be kind and helpful in our relations to those near us. But we do not trust love, and we think it could easily ruin our carefully guarded hold on life.*²

If we love like it says in 1 Corinthians 13, we could end up being persecuted, ridiculed, taken advantage of, sneered at, and despised. Love like this is seen by some to be a pitiable display of weakness, and only leads to manipulation and abuse.”

Which is, come to think of it, precisely what happened to the one person who did love perfectly like this: Jesus.

He was abused, mistreated, taken advantage of, despised, and rejected.

But it was precisely in loving like this, that Jesus demonstrated a greater and more powerful way of being in the world.

² Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 92.

It was precisely in giving himself away that Jesus demonstrated how God gets what God wants, and what God's orientation is toward human beings. God never stops giving, never stops loving, even—especially—when it seems foolish to do so.

And it is because God loved like this, that we can too.

Be imitators of God, Paul says later in Ephesians 5:1, as *dearly loved children*, and live lives of love as Christ loved us.

Again, Dallas Willard puts it very well:

*Above all, one has to find by thought and experience that love can be trusted as a way of life.... Love is not God, but God is love. It is who he is, his very identity. And our world under a God like that is a place where it is safe to do and be what is good and what is right. Living in love as Jesus defines it by his words and deeds is the sure way to know Christ in the modern world.*³

We can take the risk of striving to love like Jesus, of becoming a community where love is our centre, our reason for being, only if, like the writer of **Psalm 71**, our refuge and our hope are in the God who *is* love.

With *this* God as our rock and refuge, we can love freely, generously, and without fear, because whatever the outcome—whether our efforts are rewarded or rejected and taken advantage of—our lives are hidden with Christ.

We can entrust ourselves and to each other because we are loved by the God—and loved more fully, more faithfully than we can ever love each other.

We can trust love because, as Paul says in verse 8, *love never ends*.

Love can be difficult, but it can also be a true delight.

And it's not very complicated. Anne Lamott, in *Traveling Mercies*, puts it well:

*It's funny: I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience. But then when I grew up I found that life handed you these rusty bent old tools—friendship, prayer, conscience, honesty—and said, Do the best you can with these, they will have to do. And mostly, against all odds, they're enough.*⁴

³ Willard, 93.

⁴ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Anchor, 1999), 103.

It's not rocket science. Patience, kindness, humility, hope, perseverance, manners, truth, goodness, belief, putting the needs of others ahead of our own.

These are to characterize our relationships, our families, our church.

I conclude with a story.

E. Stanley Jones was a missionary to India in the early twentieth century. Jones had several conversations with the famous Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi, including one in which he asked Gandhi, who had a great deal of admiration for Jesus, what he would do if he was seeking to make the way of Christ known in India. Gandhi replied:

I would suggest, first of all, that you Christians, missionaries and all, begin to live more like Jesus Christ.

And:

I would suggest that you must put your emphasis upon love, for love is the centre and the soul of Christianity.

In reflecting upon this conversation, Jones said this:

He did not mean love as a sentiment, but love as a working force, the one real power in a moral universe, and he wanted it applied between individuals and groups and races and nations, the one cement and salvation of the world.⁵

The one cement and salvation of the world.

Or, as the Apostle Paul would say, “the greatest thing.”

This is our mandate. This is our calling. This is *who we are*. The world is watching and waiting for the sons and daughters of God to love like Jesus loved.

May God help us *always* to be a people, a community of love.

Amen.

⁵ Quoted in, Brian McLaren, *Why did Jesus, Moses, The Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? Christian Identity in a Multi-faith World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012), 252-53.

