

February 2, 2025
Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
"Just Love"

I couldn't tell you most of the advice I've read in advice columns. *Ask Amy* was full of thoughtful counsel. *Dear Sugar* made an art form of giving guidance. I might nod my head in agreement - or shake my head in dissent - but as soon as I close the newspaper or the laptop, the advice fades.

But years ago, something I read in a magazine lodged in my memory, and I'll never forget it. The writer was a mother, and it was something she'd told teenage daughter as she was navigating relationships with peers. She said to open the Bible to Paul's First letter to the Corinthians and read verses 4 and 5. *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; it keeps no record of wrongs...* And then, she said, read it again, and swap out the word *Love* with the name of that boy you like. The daughter went along with it. Okay. Here goes. *Joe is patient, Joe is kind. Joe is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude...* but the girl's voice faded out. What she was saying was no longer true, and she knew it. Joe wasn't always that kind... Joe had definitely been rude to the substitute math teacher that day. The columnist did not want her daughter wasting her time with arrogant Joes. She took it a step further. Read it again, sweetie. Only this time swap in your own name.

I'm a strong believer that one of the preacher's responsibilities is to be willing to take one for the team - to be the first one willing to admit weakness and fallibility. We would all love to believe that I am patient and kind, that I am not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. And I certainly try to live up to those ideals. But if I had the gall to say: Katherine does not insist on her own way and is not irritable, I can tell you who would laugh so hard the ushers might have to usher him into the Narthex to compose himself: my beloved husband.

Love is patient but waiting makes people feel squirrely and out of control. Love is kind but people wake up on the wrong side of the bed. Love is not envious but people have emotional baggage that triggers irrational jealousy. Love is not boastful but people are insecure and ravenous for approval. Love is not arrogant but people are immature. Love is not rude but people get tired and hangry.

Love keeps no record of wrongs but people have a tendency to notice and judge their own shortcomings, and double down on the deficiencies they perceive in others.

This is not to say people aren't capable of love. We are. We can love one another beautifully. But we are not capable of this perfect love laid out in Paul's epistle.

If we pretend otherwise, we'll open ourselves to two mistakes. We'll turn love into a law, even though Jesus teaches us that we need more grace, not

more rules. If we turn love into a law it will just be one more law we'll break. And then we set ourselves up for the second mistake. We'll turn into hypocrites, even though Jesus is fiercely anti-hypocrisy. If we pretend to be capable of loving perfectly and fall into those failures to love well, we will become what Paul preached against: noisy gongs, clanging cymbals, a whole lot of nothing.

A wise biblical scholar echoes the concern. "Is [the love described in 1 Corinthians] humanly possible?

As an individual character trait or a personal attitude, no; but as the presence of God's love in Christ crucified and in a community of believers that live in that love, yes. To belong to God's church... is to be an agent of God's love in the world, not seeking one's own advantage, but working on behalf of others."

This bears repeating. No, the ideal isn't possible - at least not all the time - "but as the presence of God's love in Christ crucified, and in a community of believers that live in that love, yes. To belong to God's church... is to be an agent of God's love in the world, not seeking one's own advantage, but working on behalf of others."

I want to name a strange paradox: we can be in more than one place at the same time. We inhabit a physical space, and we inhabit a spiritual space. I realize this sounds so woo-woo. Maybe too woo-woo for Wisconsin. But hear me out. In the beginning of the Book of Revelation, St. John writes

from prison on the Isle of Patmos - and yet he testifies that he was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day.

Somehow, he is both in prison, and in the Spirit. Two places at the same time. Similarly, we are citizens of the United States of America. We are also citizens of the Kingdom of God. In his letter to Christians living in Collo-see, Paul speaks of how Jesus has "rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son." Coll-see, and the kingdom. Two places at the same time.

We are here in a sanctuary in Appleton - or in a living room in Sun Lakes, or a kitchen in Oconto, or any of the other places our community of faith gathers to worship together. But no matter where your physical body is right now, we also dwell in a spiritual reality.

We live in God's love. God's perfect love. Because even though we need grace to cover our imperfect love, *God is love. God is patient; God is kind; God is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. God does not insist on God's own way; God is not irritable; God keeps no record of wrongs...* We are in a community of believers that lives in God's love.

I've gotten all the way to this point without mentioning either of the two elephants in the room. The cute little baby elephant is that most people never hear these words outside of a wedding. The big angry mama elephant is last week's relentless news cycle. Karl Barth famously said that "*We must hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.*"

As Christians, we interpret current events through the lens of our faith.

There was a lot to interpret this week, especially for Christians committed

to loving our neighbor by challenging injustice and embracing inclusivity, as Christians committed to being agents of God's love in the world.

The Black theologian and liturgist Cole Arthur Riley writes, "If your spirituality does not demand beauty and liberation for every person and piece of the cosmos, it is not God you are seeking, but a shallow ritual of self-soothing." We must be Christians who are seeking God, and demanding beauty and liberation for all people.

We are called to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep and the fact of the matter is, a lot of grieving and vulnerable and powerless people are weeping right now. Including, of course, many people in this room.

We live and move and have our being in a time of distress, confusion, and anxiety.

We live and move and have our being in God's love.

Two places at the same time.

I know that it is tempting to believe that the physical reality is more real than the spiritual reality - just as it is tempting to believe that fear is more rational than faith, and that despair is more reasonable than hope.

It is also tempting to believe that love is for wedding days at best and fairy tales at worst.

That love is far too flimsy to be trusted with anything consequential. And yet it is God's love in Christ crucified that brings justice and healing and redemption. It is God's love in Christ crucified that brings new life.

Love is not insufficient to this moment. Even if you think you can't hold onto it - it will hold onto you.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends.

This is the good news.

May it be so.