

“Love Is”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus  
concerning 1 Corinthians 13:1-13  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco  
on February 10, 2019

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am 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 do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

What more needs to be said? Paul’s spirited and moving words on the supremacy of love hardly need retelling or explaining. Paul spent all of chapter 12 addressing the various gifts of the church body—teaching, prophecy, healing, etc.—but all that is build-up to this ultimate truth: Love is supreme. Love is the thing without which the body and its gifts have no meaning.

I will admit, I struggled to write this sermon, not because I disagree with Paul or have any qualms with his premise, but because: How does one talk about love, anyway? I mean, really talk about it? Toss me a sermon on Tamar or Bathsheba any day. But ask me to preach on love? Where is the preacher to start? How do you begin to plumb the depths of its mystery or make practical and concrete its vast and often nebulous reality?

We mention love all the time and praise its singular importance. But do we really know what it is? Is it a feeling, an action, a choice, a presence? All of the above or more than be said in words? Love’s significance is evident. What *it is* harder to nail down.

You might argue that if you were to give all that had to the poor as Paul mentions in v. 3, that would, by definition, be a loving act, would it not? Divesting of the self to aid someone else? *Isn’t that love?* But Paul suggests you can do good things without love, so love is not just action alone, but something more than action. What makes an act loving vs. unloving? Is it the way you feel when you do it? While there are times I feel love in my heart, I also know that there are times when I act with love even though in the moment I feel something else—say irritation or exhaustion. Human relationships could not survive if we were required to feel warm fuzzies all the time about each other for it to count as love. What makes an act loving vs. unloving? Is it your motive? Maybe. But do you often do things with perfectly clear motives? It seems for me my motives are usually a mixed bag. What makes an act loving vs. unloving? Is it the *way* in which you do the act? Whether you do it as act of power over or as an act of sharing power? What makes something *count* as love?

Fortunately the Apostle Paul doesn’t just leave us in the dark. He makes an effort at defining that which often feels indefinable. He says this:

*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. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

This, I think, is a pretty good start. “Love is not boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way.” Paul leaves no room for domineering, coercive behavior that feigns to be love. There is no lording over, no talking down to, no controlling in Paul’s definition of love.

This is important because it sets clear expectations about what love looks like; it makes it impossible for any abusive relationship—be it a relationship with a parent, a partner, a congregation, or “God”—it makes it impossible to call that abuse “love.” That matters because too often verses like this are used to keep victims submissive—the victim is told to stick it out and stay silent because, after all, “love is patient, love is kind” and “love bears all things,” as if God wants you to bear abuse and be patient with evil. This is a misuse of Paul’s words because it fails to hold the perpetrator accountable to the same standard of love. If you are ever in a one-sided scenario where only one party is expected to live lovingly, that isn’t love. It is abuse, and you have permission to leave the sham behind.

Paul’s definition of love also matters because God is love, and if this is love, this is God. *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 or resentful; God does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

You might get a lot of mixed messages out there about who God is. When in doubt, return to this: *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 or resentful; God does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth . . .* Say it on repeat if you have to as many times as it takes to purge your soul of toxic theology.

Paul then says this:

*Love never ends.*

Love is eternal, or to put it another way, in the end, there is God. God, Love, whatever you call it—when everything else is over and done with, this is what remains. This essence that animates life, this Love that saves us—this is what is left. Alleluia. Alleluia.

*Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.*

The need for prophecy, for tongues, even for knowledge—all that will cease because all will be known and all that we will know is Love. Paul says:

*For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I*

*reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.*

I take this to mean that what we know of love in our lives—what we understand about love now, based on our romantic experiences, our friendships, our family—all that is a mere foggy reflection of the Love that is God. The love we know through relationships is like looking at the moon and mistaking it for the sun. The moon is a lovely thing and worthy of awe—but it is still only a weak reflection of the real raw power of light. And so it is with God. What we know of love on earth is so thin, so veiled, so dim compared to what Love actually is. One day, Paul claims, we will know this Love face to face. It will no longer be mystery; it will be face-to-face, skin-to-skin close-up. Paul continues:

*Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

He gives us one final hint as to what love really is. He suggests it is the quality of being fully known. What is more, Paul says even though *he* is yet to know and understand God's love fully, God has known him fully all along. Whether you are aware of it or not, whether you are in tune with it or not, the Great Mystery of Love has already enveloped you, seen you, known all your ins and outs and declared you most lovable. We don't have to understand Love or be able to define it before we can have it. Love is already yours. Love is all around you. Love has seen you in full and decided to stick it out and remain by your side, whether you know it or not. You are fully known. You are fully loved.

*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

Amen.