

THE GREATEST OF THESE
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January 31, 2010
4th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

God is love, we say. And those who abide in love abide in God. That's one way to define the ineffable, indescribable, infinite mystery we call "God." *God is love.* But then that begs the question: what is *love*?

For just as surely as there are false gods there are false loves. In the name of love horrific things have been done to others. "I love you" can be a ploy, a ruse to get what you want at the expense of another. *Beware of predators proclaiming love.*

Love is all you need, we say and that is true as long as we know what love is. My own father who was a son of a Pennsylvania coalminer and life time blue collar worker on the P&LE railroad, was skeptical even cynical when it came to the Beatles' anthem in the summer of love.

LUV, he mockingly called it. He believed warm and fuzzy feelings were not enough to get important things done. He was a practical man. He believed in the *works* of love more than the *words* of love. As it turns out, he was right to be skeptical.

Love is a many splendored thing, we say. And it is. It is charity, it is compassion, it is affection, it is romance, it is friendship, it's a warm puppy. These are forms of love.

Yes, love is certainly a feeling. And in that case we call it affection or compassion and it attaches to many people and things. But love is also an act of the will. It is both grace and grit. The command to love our neighbors and even our enemies implies that love is something other than a feeling.

But, how, you might ask, can I love my neighbors when I feel no affection or compassion toward them? Well, said C. S. Lewis, act as if you did and maybe the feeling will follow. Or, as AA people say: fake it until you make it. Of course, loving others is much easier when it's backed by affection but we are not excused from our duty as Christians just because we lack the proper feeling. Love is both grace and grit.

Brides and grooms often request that 1 Corinthians 13 be read at their wedding. And that's a good thing especially for young besotted couples who think love is only romance. Love is romance. But there's more to love than romance. Romance will not sustain a marriage very long. Friendship will. We fall in love, head over heels. Hormones have a lot to do with that. It can't be helped. But we build a marriages and

communities such as this with another kind of love. And that takes time, practice, and patience.

The Apostle Paul's anthem to love (1 Cor. 13) was directed to a community wracked by division, by status seeking, by prejudice, by boastfulness, by vanity, by smugness, and by unkind behavior. The Corinthians were cosmopolitan, affluent, savvy and cool. Not unlike us! But they lacked the greatest thing of all.

1 Cor. 13 isn't the only or best or final word on love. But it's a pretty good start. And it just might be a good way for us to end our day, everyday. At the close of the day you might ask yourself: when and how did I offer love today; and when and how did I receive it. When was I patient, kind and humble today? And when wasn't I that way?

1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

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.

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. 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.

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

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

Just for fun you might write your own version of 1 Cor. 13. Many people have. Here's one such version that I found in my files. I don't know the author. If you do, let me know so I can give credit.

The Greatest is Love

What if I could stand up here and say the most wonderful things,
and sound impressive
and answer everyone's questions, but I didn't love anyone—
what would be the point?
What if we were the most incredible church in town
Where every pew was filled
The preaching was always inspirational
we had a choir that always sang perfectly

and served the best coffee in town
But no one felt love—what would be the point?

And if as a community we teach our children
lots of data and knowledge
and they can recite the books of the Bible
And know all the right words
but they don't know how to love, we've failed them.

If we are thrilled to have a day off
to honor the birth of the prophet, Martin Luther King
and yet we don't do anything to alleviate poverty
racial inequality
injustice and oppression
in this community, in our workplaces—
what have we gained.

If we put Mother Teresa of Calcutta on a pedestal
revere her as a saint
admire her from a distance,
and yet do not feed and clothe the hungry and the naked
do not care for the sick and the dying
do not provide basic health care to all our people
where is the honesty in that?
If we don't love... what's the point?

Love is... good!
Love is kind and patient
love is trusting.
If we remember that God's love triumphs in the end—
if we really believe that—then we can trust God
we can dare to dream,
dare to live as God's people.
Love always wants what's best, even for the other guy.
Love cheers for both sides in the great football game of life,
And says, "Let's just have fun together, who cares who wins?"

Love is always supportive.
Love turns things around;
takes hopeless situations and lets us see hope in them.
Love enables us to move mountains,
break down walls, and plant flowers.
Love never, ever, ever ends.
We may even give up,
but God's love will continue.
And what is perfect will someday appear,
what is not perfect will disappear.
The world will turn and turn.

You know when I was a small child
I looked at the world with a child-like wonder:
I trusted, I dreamed, I wondered, I hoped
Then I grew up and I became "practical"

I became cynical
Now all I can understand about God's way
is what my grown up mind will let me
But when I allow my inner child
to listen to God's voice
and to really live
I'm not so scared anymore
I have a sense that things can work out
I know that one day, yet, I will see God face to face!
One day I will understand everything, just like God does now!
Won't that be incredible!!

But for now I don't need to do that
I don't need to know everything
I don't need to understand everything
I don't need answers to all life's questions
I don't have to wait until I'm older
or wish I were younger
I don't have to wish I were taller or shorter
or even more good looking
I just have to try.
Try and do what God wants of me
Stop looking for excuses.
I simply have to remember
that there are three things in life that really matter:
Faith, hope and love
And the greatest of these is love.