

*Agape*  
A sermon by Bill Chadwick  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
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**I Corinthians 13: 1-13    The Gift of Love**

*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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,<sup>[a]</sup> but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*<sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup> but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror, dimly,<sup>[b]</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

When you hear these words from this famous “Love Chapter,” what specific images come into your mind? White dress, tuxedos, flowers, unity candles, nervous father of the bride, and especially a young couple so deeply in love. How astonished the Apostle Paul would be to find that his words are today used almost exclusively in the context of weddings. If you’ve read Paul’s

letters, you know he was not really big on marriage. In this same letter to the church at Corinth, chapter 7, Paul says, “Better not to get married, like me.” These words in chapter 13 were not addressed to a couple in love, but to a congregation...a congregation that was misbehaving.

In this chapter, Paul tackles issues that he has mentioned earlier in this letter.

Love does not envy (13:4)

But envy and strife characterize the Corinthians (3:3)

Love does not boast (13:4)

But the Corinthians do (4:7; 5:6)

Love is not puffed up (13:4),

But the Corinthians are (4:6, 18-19; 5:2; 8:10)

Love is not shameful (13:5),

As Paul teaches (7:36)

Love is not self-seeking (13:5)

As Paul models (10:33)

Love does not delight in injustice (13:6)

But some Corinthians manipulate unjust courts (6:7-8)

(Christopher R. Hutson, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*, p. 304).

The Corinthians were proud of their spiritual gifts. Paul says to them, “Practice all of your spiritual gifts with love.”

And the love that Paul is talking about is, in the Greek, the language of our New Testament, the word “agape.” AGAPE. Most of you have heard of this.

Agape: reminds me of a story. We all have our favorite ways of signing off at the end of letters or emails. “Sincerely,” “Yours truly” in the olden days. Many of my friends end with “Peace,” or “Shalom” and then sign their name. I often use “Blessings.” And I want you to know that it’s not just habit. I

think about it each time and I really mean it. I read of a pastor who always ended his letters with the biblical word “Agape.” Finally, one of his parishioners, looking at a letter from their pastor, asked another parishioner, “Why is our pastor *always* agape (pronounced uh-GAPE)?”

Well, it’s agape (pronounced uh-GAH-pay).

As some of you know, there are three different words in the Greek language that usually get translated into English as “love.”

There is “philo,” which means the love we have for our family members, siblings. It’s the root for the word “Philadelphia,” the “city of brotherly love.” For some of us, there may be some irony there. My older brother, Cal, was mostly a tremendous brother, but when we were younger...well, he was a lot older than my brother John and I, fourteen years older than John and nine years older than I. Of course, being boys, we three regularly wrestled with each other. And Cal regularly twisted us into pretzels. He would pin me down and then let the spit hang down out of his mouth over my face and then slurp it back up. Usually. Not always successfully. At our family dinner table, his assigned seat was to my left. For years and years, Cal never used a napkin. He would wipe his hands on my left pant leg. I’m sure teachers wondered why every single pair of pants I owned was stained on the left leg. But when he was 21 he had to have double hernia surgery. This was not arthroscopic, as it would be today, with a one-inch incision. He had two six-inch incisions cutting through all those muscles and tendons in the groin area. After surgery, even the tiniest movement gave him great pain. Ha-ha! It was Revenge Time for the little brothers. We would run up to him and pretend like we were going to jump in his lap. He would tense up and cringe and moan in pain. We’d fire balls at him. Again, he would tense and cry out. It was delicious, as long as it lasted. A few weeks later we really paid for it.

Well, as I said, as we got older we all got along better. And he was a truly tremendous big brother. Now, out of the original five siblings, three boys and two girls, there are only two of us left. My little brother John and I were always close, but now he is very intentional about our relationship. He never lets more than three or four days go by without checking in by phone with me, to see how I’m doing. That’s brotherly love. Philo.

We love each other very much, but we don't send each other Valentines. The love we celebrate on Valentine's Day, the love in which our hearts go pitter pat, is a different word in the Greek. It is Eros, from which we get the English word "erotic." It's romantic love, sexual love, *feelings*. What we mean when we say we "fell in love at first sight." Eros.

But Paul is talking about "agape" love, which has little to do with feelings, and almost everything to do with actions. It means to put someone else's well-being ahead of your own. (Vitaly important caveat: I am *not* saying for one second that we put up with any sort of abuse. Are we clear on that?) Outside of that situation, agapaic love means to choose to act in ways that are loving, even if we don't feel like it. That's what committed relationships are all about. Doing nice things for the other person, even when we don't feel like it. Jesus commanded us to love our enemies. He didn't say we had to *like* them, had to have warm and fuzzy feelings toward them, but to *act* in ways that are loving. And sometimes our enemy is that person to whom we are married.

I saw a video this week in which a little kid, a boy of about five, was asked to define love and he said, "Love is a lollipop...with a scorpion inside."

Whoa. We all have some scorpion inside. We all sometimes sting the people we love. That's just life in relationship. When I was a young man I thought some people had easy schmeasy marriages, 100% of the time. Hah! I've not seen one. Again, if we are talking about marriages, our hope is to have both eros and agape, feelings and committed actions.

Again, agape love means to choose to act in ways that are loving, even if we don't feel like it. (Which brings me to caveat number #2: I'm not saying that people should never ever divorce. That would be rather hypocritical, since I have personally experienced the death of a committed relationship. Sometimes ending a marriage is the best of some horribly hard choices.)

Agape love means choosing to act in ways that are good for the other person, whether that person is a spouse, or our child or our little brother, or co-worker, or fellow parishioner, or neighbor, or...enemy.

All three kinds of love—family love, romantic love, and agapaic, sacrificial love—are gifts from God. And they are all rooted in God’s underlying and preceding love for us. As the author of First John writes: “We love because God first loved us.” (4:19)

This love chapter, I Corinthians 13, ends with a paragraph about the eternal nature of love. Love never ends. Love endures. It’s an ironic and profoundly beautiful fact of human existence, that the one thing that lasts forever is the love that is given away. We become strikingly aware of this at memorial services. I am reminded of the saying, attributed to various sources: “When you were born, you cried, and the world rejoiced. Conduct your life in such a way that when you die, the world cries, and you rejoice.”

There is another “love chapter” in the Bible. It’s also chapter number 13. This one is found in the Gospel of John, in which Jesus, in his final instructions to his disciples at the Last Supper says, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” Amen.

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Before we look at wedding photos of some of our Oak Grove couples that have been married fifty years, let me share some responses that kids have given to the question, “What is love?”

Rebecca, age 8. “When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn’t bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis, too. That’s love.”

Billy, age 4. “When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth.”

Nikki, age 6. “If you want to learn to love better, you should start with (someone) who you hate.”

Noelle, age 7. “Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it every day.”

Tommy, age 6. “Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well.”

Cindy, age 8 “During my piano recital, I was on a stage and I was scared. I looked at all the people watching me, and saw my daddy waving and smiling. He was the only one doing that. I wasn’t scared any more.”

Chris, age 8. “Love is when Mommy sees Daddy smelly and sweaty, and still says he is handsomer than Robert Redford.”

Lauren, age 4. “I know my older sister loves me because she gives me all her old clothes and has to go out and buy new ones.”

Karen, age 7 “When you love somebody, your eyelashes go up and down and little stars come out of you.”

Jessica, age 8 “You really shouldn’t say ‘I love you’ unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget.”

I love you.