

Haydenville Congregational Church

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1 Corinthians 13:1-13

“Love is patient, love is kind...”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

*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.*

In this well known passage from the book of 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul is writing a letter to the Church in Corinth—a congregation he founded years earlier in the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia. Paul expounds on the characteristics of love and appeals to the early Christians in Corinth to let love be the governing power in the life of their community. One must assume that the impetus for Paul to write such a letter was that members of the church in Corinth were exhibiting behaviors that were not loving, maybe quite unsavory—those early Christians were known to be confused, to fight, to disagree on which way was the best route forward. (Does that sound familiar?). So Paul, who was their teacher and counselor even from afar, writes to the congregation from Ephesus where he is probably dealing with another group of wayward Christians. And he writes about LOVE—what love is and how love is to be expressed. Paul provides an eloquent description of love, one that is used today in many wedding ceremonies. But his description of love is also a tall order—hard to attain and hard to maintain.

Having lived 58 years and been a daughter, sister, friend, partner, mother, pastor, neighbor and community member, I know that if I were to write Paul’s letter to a church, if I were to write to THIS church a list of characteristics about love, I would probably repeat Paul’s moving list of beautiful qualities of pure, delicious, selfless love...but I would add a few lines, an addition, an addendum, a P.S. because I think Paul stops too soon. Yes, love at its finest is patient and kind, not envious or boastful, arrogant or rude. Yes love at its finest is all the things the apostle Paul lists in his beautiful litany. But I would add: love is messy and

impatient, painful and heart-breaking, awkward and chaotic, demanding and challenging. I think I might just add: Love is hard. Paul does say that part but love is just plain hard.

It is hard because human beings are complicated and we rarely experience just one emotion at one time. We have baggage and history, competing needs and desires, we want people to read our minds and know how to love us. We struggle with ourselves, and with each other. We ARE capable of loving deeply and well and we WANT to be loved deeply and well but we are also self-involved, temperamental, easily hurt, and moody.

When I do pre-marital counseling with couples I ask them a series of questions about their relationship. One of my standard questions is: do you fight well? The couples who have been together less than a year are appalled that I would even suggest that they fight. The couples who have been living together a long time smile and tell me how they fight (sometimes it is good and clean, sometimes not). Love involves conflict. Inevitably. Love involves conflict. So it is not a question IF people who love each other will fight it is HOW people who love each other will fight and if they can fight owning their own emotions, hearing the other person fully even in the midst of the conflict, using “I” statements (not “you” statements), and looking for win-win outcomes.

Love is hard. Conflict arises. It must be dealt with well. Paul does not mention that part.

Paul also does not mention that putting YOU before ME in my thinking and acting does not really come naturally. Putting you before me is something we have to learn and have to practice. Years ago, the *Nova* TV series advertised that it was going to air an intimate portrait of two groups whose members labor exclusively for the good of the community. In other words, no individual in either group put himself or herself first. Who were these remarkable groups marked by such selflessness? people wondered before the show aired. Were they some isolated clan living in South America, some tribe in a remote corner of the world? When, after much hype, the show aired and the two groups turned out to be ants and cockroaches. To find individual life forms who are BY NATURE selfless, *Nova* had to look outside the human species.

Love is hard but we are called by God to love one another. We are called in fact to love our neighbor as ourselves—which means we must love ourselves and the other as much. Tall order.

It makes me think of a piece our Sandy Blackmon gave me several years ago, it is called “The Paradoxical Commandments” and I hung it in my office at home after she gave it to me. “The Paradoxical Commandments,” by Kent M. Keith, begins with this line, “People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway.”

Love them anyway. Good advice. But Paul didn’t mention that either.

What Paul does know is that he is trying to lead and teach a community, and LOVE in a community—like love between two people—is demanding and people need guidance and practice. Paul understands that. Being in community is hard. Paul knows that and he is sending an early Christian congregation a letter filled with the lofty vision of what love CAN be like.

Community is hard. Paul knew that and I know that, and you know that. But as I say so often in this Sanctuary—in sermons, in prayers—Jesus’ entire ministry was carried out in community and he called us to follow him and do the same. Jesus loved his disciples with a deep love, AND he struggled with them as well—he got angry and he was short with them (“Get behind me Satan,” he said to his beloved Peter). But Jesus remained embedded in community and he calls us to minister, teach and lead in community—he calls us to stay in the struggle, to love and forgive, to recognize the challenges and endure and carry on. The disciples were annoying and didn’t understand who Jesus was, they were competitive and even whiny. In some ways Jesus modeled for us those three helpful words from the Kent Keith poem: “Love them anyway.”

I think we recognize that we are broken and whole, magnificent and flawed, open-hearted and unreasonable, precious and irritating, AND we are deeply, powerfully loved by God. I think that is an important and liberating part of our identity as people of faith. We are imperfect AND we are deeply loved by God.

And we in turn love those who like us are imperfect. And we do our best. Each day we do our best. And some days our love really is patient and kind, not envious, boastful or arrogant, not irritable or resentful. On our best days, when our best self comes forward, our love looks and sounds like Paul’s litany. But we can still be loving someone when our patience runs out (anyone here a parent?); we can still be loving someone when we argue passionately (anyone here married?); we can still be loving someone when we are envious (anyone here a friend?); we can still be loving someone when we are resentful (anyone here a sibling?). We are complicated. Love is hard. And we love anyway.

I am a real fan of Paul's letters and I find his litany about love in Corinthians to be inspired and inspiring. But as I have said, it is a tall order. So I went looking for other translations of the Bible to see if I could wrap my arms around Paul's explanation of love when presented in other terms.

I pulled The Message by Eugene Peterson off the shelf: The Bible in Contemporary Language—a translation we have turned to often in this Church. Here is the same passage, 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 from The Message:

*Love never gives up,
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always "me first,"
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.*

I like some of those lines. Love "isn't always me first." Well I can live with that. It recognizes that I am internally programmed to have the tendency, all humans have the tendency, to move through the world thinking "me first." But! But! I can try each day to not always be "me first." Peterson's version of Paul's words say love "isn't always me first." That's a good goal to strive for at home and in community.

Peterson says love "takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, trusts God always, always looks for the best." Okay, those are also worth trying to attain...at home and in community. This stuff is hard.

It may be Valentine's Day but I am sorry—those gushy cards that present love as one monolithic emotion that is easy, sentimental, romantic and simple are not acknowledging real love—love is multi-layered, it sometimes involves contradictory feelings, it is challenging AND wonderful and deep and profound and HARD.

Now when I return to Paul's litany on love in the book of 1 Corinthians, I realize that when Paul lists those beautiful characteristics of what love is, he is reflecting God's pure love for us.

God's love for us IS patient and kind, not irritable or resentful, rejoices in the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Good for Paul. He captured the way we are loved by God.

And Paul sets the bar high, inviting us to love one another the way God loves us.

And so on this Valentine's Day I am caught in the paradox of recognizing that we are imperfect beings, not quite as evolved as ants and cockroaches, we have selfish tendencies and mood swings. But we are also capable of loving deeply and well AND learning to love even more deeply and well.

Paul has given us the lofty vision, God has given us the lived experience.

God's love for us IS what Paul describes. It is pure and perfect love.

We are cherished by God and chosen over and over and over as God's beloved.

Paul has given us the lofty vision, God has given us the lived experience.

Being loved and chosen by God makes me think of a story in the book our Church Book Group just finished reading and met to discuss yesterday, Grace (Eventually) by Ann Lamott.

In Grace (Eventually), Ann Lamott tells this story about her experience with her Sunday School class in her Presbyterian Church in Marin City, California.

Lamott says that after welcoming everyone to the class, and making introductions around the circle, she always does an exercise called "Loved and Chosen."

Listen to her description...

"I welcomed everyone, made introductions, and then launched into Soft Body. We clenched our fists, our faces, and scrunched our shoulders up to our ears, like Nixon. We held that for a minute, grimacing, and at the count of three, we released. Then we did it again. It's a tool for the children, the tool of having their bodies be quiet for a few minutes.

Next, as always, we did Loved and Chosen. I sat on the couch and glanced slowly around in a goofy, menacing way, and then said "Is anyone here wearing a blue sweatshirt with Pokemon on it?" The four-year-old looked down at his chest, astonished to discover that he matched this description—like, What are the odds? He raised his hand. "Come over here to the couch," I said. "You are so loved, and so chosen." He clutched at himself like a beauty pageant finalist. Then I asked if anyone that day was wearing green socks with brown shoes, a Giants cap,

an argyle vest? Each of them turned out to be loved and chosen.... Even the other teacher Neshama—Anyone in red shoes today?—leapt toward the couch with relief.”

And so today I ask YOU: anyone in a pull-over sweater?

You are so loved and so chosen.

Anyone in a blue shirt today?

You are so loved and so chosen.

Anyone in pants or a skirt?

You are so loved and so chosen.

Anyone in shoes or boots?

You are so loved and so chosen.

Paul gave us the vision. God gave us the experience.

Love is hard and real, complicated and worth it.

Keep loving, keep working at it.

Love deeply, love fully. Love anyway.

Happy Valentine’s Day.

Amen.