

Title: Love Is Everlasting
Date: February 23, 2020 – Ash Wednesday
Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister
Scripture: [1 John 3:1-1-3](#)
Text: [1 Corinthians 13:8-13](#)
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Does anyone here know someone who got married Thursday? I don't but it was supposed to be a big day. We have a wedding chapel in the San Fernando Valley, The Little Brown Church. A lot of famous people got married there, like Nancy Davis. She married March 4, 1952, a fellow actor named Ron, Ronald Reagan. The Little Brown Church does big business on Valentine's Day, sometimes as many as forty or fifty weddings. Last Thursday was almost as busy because people wanted to be married on 2-20-2020. Anyone want to guess what the most popular passage of scripture is at the Little Brown Church.

We are trying to rescue the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians from its romantic captivity. Paul didn't write this passage to be read at weddings. It isn't about a love found in marriage, even if there is probably a lot in the passage that applies. It is written to a group of people who are terrible about love, awful at understanding God's love, showing God's love, and loving one another.

This is the third and last week focusing on this passage and it will help if we do a little review of where we've walked because, some of you don't remember what I've shared, and some have missed a week or two. It's an interesting letter that contains this famous passage of scripture.

It is written to the church in Corinth, a congregation for which Paul has great affection. It would not be unfair to suggest that he loved them. But that in itself is remarkable because if you look carefully at this church, they aren't very lovable. They were, in fact, a mess.

There was posturing going on about who was the best Christian. There were all kinds of economic injustices. There was sexual impropriety. There were pagan influences. But more than anything else, there was fussing and fighting about spiritual gifts. There was a lot of "I'm better than you are because I've got this spiritual gift and you don't." Paul spends the entire 12th and 14th chapters dealing with it. Sandwiched in between is this beautiful

passage on love which Paul introduces by saying, "And yet I will show you the most excellent way." (1 Corinthians 12:31a)

What the most excellent way? Love. Not the love of couples marrying on 2-20-2020, but God's love, agape love. Agape is something of a coined word in the Greek world, found largely in the New Testament. It's God's love for us, our love for God, and the love which we are to show others because God's love is working through us. It's a mindset more than an emotion. It's an act of the will. Paul says, "If you don't have it, you've got nothing. Love is everything, or it's not.

You can be the best-looking man in the world, like George Clooney, or the most recognized talk show host ever, like Oprah Winfrey, or the MVP of World Series, without cheating, and you don't have love, you've don't have anything. Looks, celebrity, skill, without love is nothing, nada, zilch. That's how important love is. Or course Paul isn't comparing looks, celebrity or baseball talent. He's talking about spiritual gifts and you can have all sorts of gifts, but without love, you have nothing.

Having made this point clear, Paul then describes love, its attitude, and its action. He says, "love is patient," because God is patient with us. We know that both the corporate and personal history of humanity, that is to say, the history of the world and people in general, and your personal history, as recent as yesterday, or perhaps even today--we know that everybody in total and you in particular, mess up, sin, not once, twice but over and over again. The world's a mess and we are a mess and God is patient with us. God doesn't hold it against us but rather, God is kind enough to forgive us, kind enough to work with us, kind enough to offer mercy and compassion. God's steadfast love is patient and...it is kind. And because we are to love God and love neighbor, as Jesus challenged, and because we are, as John put it, to love because he first loved us, we are to be patient and kind. Paul says this is the attitude and the action of love.

Of course, the Corinthians aren't very good at that because there was lots of envy going on, people wanting to have what others had. Some were boasting about their gifts or accomplishments. Pride was getting in the way of relationships and it was irritating. It ended up causing people to be irritable, resentful and just flat out rude, happy in their wrongdoing and not being truthful.

Can you imagine anyone who is arrogant and brags, who insists on their own way, who is easily irritated, can be resentful if not revengeful, rejoicing in wronging, but seldom in the truth? Unfortunately, we can. It's all over the

place, all over social media, here and there and there and here. It's not lovely; it is ugly. It is now and it was then which is the very reason that Paul is writing this chapter about love. For all their good qualities, there were many worse qualities.

Fortunately, all of that behavior, good or bad, doesn't last. The only thing that lasts is love because "love never ends." That's the point Paul makes, not the final point but **the** point. If you are predisposed to mark your Bible, it should be highlighted and underlined. It never ends. Love is eternal...everlasting. It outlasts everything; it remains, stands when all else has fallen. "When all of those things pass away, what is left is love."

Your gifts of tongue and talent eventually go away. Your prophecy and your position, doesn't last. What you know and who you know disappears. Everything is eventually gone because your bank account isn't eternal. Your good looks, your popularity, your fame, you can't take with you. All eventually pass because all of this is partial. When the complete comes, when the perfect arrives, it all goes away. That's what Paul is saying. The only thing that lasts is love.

Paul is describing heaven. There are no pearly gates or bricks of gold in his description. There aren't angels flying around or cherubs guarding the throne. We can imagine all of those things, write them in books or put them in movies, but the window of eternity is murky, like looking into a smoky mirror. The only thing we know for sure is love because love is...everlasting, eternal.

If there is a case to connect chocolate with this love chapter, I can make it here. But I won't use the heart-shaped chocolate that dominates this month. I'll point us forward to the next big chocolate sales opportunity, Easter and direct your attention to a Cadbury Crème Egg. I do this knowing that for the aficionado of this egg, it is controversial. The original egg and recipe, created in England in 1923, isn't available in the US. There is a ban on that egg because Hershey's wanted to make their own and the recipe is a little different.

But they look the same and it is the look that is important to what Paul is teaching us. Unwrap either egg and you have a chocolate egg-shaped shell and then, when you break it open, at the very center, you have a gooey, sugary mixture that looks just like a yolk. At the center is the very essence which determines the character of this chocolate. It defines it; it is its indispensable quality. Take it away and it's just chocolate.¹

This is what Paul is saying about God. The center of God is not holiness. It's not God's omnipotence or omniscience, power or knowledge. At the center, at the core of who God is, is love, and everything else emanates out from that. When you strip away what is nonessential from anything and you dig deep enough to find out what is center, you discover the truth. Paul is placing love at the center and saying, it is and always will be because this is who God is. Therefore, love is everlasting; love is eternal.

Before you fall asleep on Paul's eschatological epistemology, (that's the official theological term for what Paul is doing) in describing heaven, or lest you, like the Corinthians, are tempted to say, "so what?", Paul explains why this is so important and he does so in a very personal way. He says, "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." (1 Corinthians 13:11).

It's a poem within a poem, a sudden switch to the first person. He's making it personal because Paul knows that God's love is personal. He's stopping to pull out his before and after picture, to hold them up to the Corinthians. He is saying, "Look, this is who I used to be, and this is who I am now."

You can see the before picture in Acts 7. There you find one of the longest sermons in the New Testament, preached not by Jesus, but by Stephen. Stephen gives the arc of God in history over time, and he ends it with the power of Jesus. Then, as any good preacher does, at the end of his sermon he brings it to the point of conviction. He calls them a stick-necked people who resist the Holy Spirit and calls them to repentance.

They did not respond well to this call to repentance. When they heard these words, they became enraged. They pulled him out of the city and stoned him. Lurking in the shadows is Paul, then known Saul, and Acts says, he "...approved of the killing him." Chapter 8 then goes on to describe Saul/Paul as ravaging the church. He was dragging men and women into the street and off to prison. He was breathing threats of murder against the disciples of Jesus. It's the before picture of a man arrogant and hateful. How can that man write all of the beautiful words for us to understand what love is? What happened? He met Jesus.

On the road to Damascus, Saul/Paul met Jesus and it drove him to his knees. On his knees, he was, completely, totally changed. When you compare the before picture of Saul breathing murderous threats to the after picture of Paul writing such beautiful words about love in 1 Corinthians 13, you are in the presence of what is possible when somebody encounters

earth-shattering, soul-changing love. It is a picture of what John writes "Behold, the love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God..." (1 John 3:1). Paul didn't know that love until he met Jesus. He had to experience it.

Love found in the lavish gift of God's only Son Jesus and love found in a Savior provides the mode of knowing that provides continuity between the present age and the age to come. Love is the constant between our present incomplete knowledge and full knowledge yet to come.² We can only know in part now but when we are face to face, we will know completely. That is what Paul meant when he said, "Now [in this life] I know in part, then [when the perfect comes] I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

It is easy to see when you look at Paul's before and after picture when he comes to the conclusion that he does. "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:13) Why is it the greatest? Because love outlasts everything, it is eternal.

The question as we conclude Paul's great exposition of love is this. When we look at your before and after pictures, is love easy to see? It is what Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to consider and there for us to consider.

Having met Jesus, are you changed because of it? Does your behavior show it? Does your life reflect it? Can we see deep within you love? I hope so. Because this love is offered by Jesus to you. *You* are the one Jesus loves. You are the one God sent Jesus to find that you might be called a child of God. You are the one whom God loves —you. If you've got it, you've got everything. People can see within you patience and kindness, faith in Jesus, hope in the eternal and love, which is, of course, the greatest. Why? Because if you've got it, that love, along with you, will be everlasting.

¹ <https://www.eatthis.com/cadbury-creme-egg/>

² Wright, N.T. Love to Knowing. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2020/02/loving-to-know>