

Love in Action

For the children:

Let me show you something. (*I have a piece of cardboard wrapped in aluminum foil.*) It's supposed to be a mirror.

What do you think? Can you see yourself in this?

This gives you a little bit of an idea of what you look like, but it's not quite the same as a regular mirror, is it? You wouldn't want to use this when you're combing your hair, would you? You want a real mirror for that.

In our scripture today, Paul says sometimes we look at things and think it is love, but it's like looking in this mirror (1 Cor. 13:12).

Have you ever said you love candy?
How many of you love to play outside?
Do you ever hear someone say they love new clothes?

When we say we love those things, it really isn't the same as the kind of love God has for us. It helps us understand it a little, but only a little. Kinda like this mirror.

We know about love from other things, though. Moms and Dads love their children. Husbands and wives love each other. Brothers and sisters love each other. And those relationships help us understand a little more about God's love.

But the best way to know about God's love is to listen to the stories of Jesus. He came to teach us what love is all about. In fact, the Bible says that God sent Jesus because God loves us (Jn. 3:16)!

That's like looking in a *real* mirror.

I'm glad I don't need to use a mirror like this. And I'm glad to know what love really looks like, too.

Let's pray:

God, thank you for loving us. Thank you for showing us how to love. Thank you for Jesus who helps us learn how we can love, too. Amen.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

1 Cor. 13:1-13 (KJV)

For the adults:

Last week we heard about Paul's initial visit to Corinth, a place where he stayed longer than anywhere else on his missionary journeys. Two years after he leaves, while he is in Ephesus, Paul writes to them.¹ Our text today comes from that letter.

Sometimes we forget that the Epistles of Paul were originally sent as letters to a particular group of people in a particular place at a particular time. With a few exceptions, most of them were not intended to be read outside the walls of the church where they were sent. In other words, we are eavesdropping on a private conversation. I'm not sure the people in Corinth would want us to know what Paul said to them, but these words became part of the church canon, in part because of who wrote them and when they were written.

And today's chapter, the so-called love chapter, has become well-known and is much-loved by many. It is so familiar, in fact, that we don't always listen to it. And whenever that happens to me, I try to find a different translation than one I am accustomed to using. I force myself to hear it differently, so it isn't said the way I remember it.

That's why I asked Lori to read it using the King James Version, to see if the older English usage may help us hear it better.

Now, I know many people find the language of the King James Version to be more poetic, if not archaic. Somehow the phrasing reminds us that God's truth is eternal. And I know that's part of why some people insist on using the King James translation of the Bible.

The King James translation was completed in 1611. The work began in response to an edict of the King to make an accurate translation of the Bible in the common language of the people in England. The translation committee was chosen by King James and worked with the best tools they had available to them.

The problem with the King James Version is that the English language continues to change. We no longer speak the same language; it's no longer our common language.

And while the English language has changed significantly throughout the past 400 years, it was also the *only* English translation of the Bible until the 1950's. It is what people grew up hearing in church. So, we *want* to hear the 23rd Psalm and the Lord's Prayer using that translation rather than a more recent one.

Today's text, however, is a curious reversal of that trend. We are much more familiar with more recent translations than the King James translation. What most of us realized as we heard Lori read it is that this chapter, commonly referred to as "the love chapter," doesn't include the word "love" at all. Instead, it uses "Charity."

Charity.

¹ Hays, p. 5

That's the way the King James translation team decided to translate *agape*, a Greek word that is now more often translated "love." The dilemma is that in Greek there are several words for the various nuances of the concept of "love," of which *agape* is only one.

And despite the common use of this passage at weddings, the truth is that Paul is not talking about romantic love. Rather, he is talking about the unconditional love of God for us and the reflection of that love in our lives. Many couples reflect that kind of love in their marriages, but *agape* isn't limited to or by marriage.

By using a word other than love in this chapter, the seventeenth century translators help us hear some of that nuance – even if it robs it of some of the more familiar poetic form we long to hear. "Love is patient, love is kind" becomes "charity suffereth long, *and* is kind." (1 Cor. 13:4, comparing NIV with KJV).

Unfortunately, charity is often understood with an attitude of condescension in modern usage. We tend to think of it as throwing things out rather than lifting others up. We tend to use charity to speak about those who are on the receiving end of a gift.

In 1611, however, charity was a high ideal of giving and caring for another person. It is giving because of who the giver is, not because of who the benefactor is. In fact, a better synonym for "charity" might be "mercy" rather than "love."

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth addresses several different issues. In this section of the letter, he is concerned about people who think they are more important than others. He begins this section by reminding us that everyone has a gift, and that the gifts are meant for the well-being of the whole (1 Cor. 12:7).

After listing various gifts, however, Paul reminds us that our gifts are not as important as the way we use our gifts. In that sense, it is very much like the story of the three hermits that Leo Tolstoy tells. In that story, there are three hermits who live on an isolated island. They spent their time in prayer, praying for their own salvation and for the salvation of the world.

When a Bishop was on a ship that passed by, he asked to be allowed to visit the hermits. When he met them, however, he was appalled that they didn't even know the Lord's Prayer! So, he spent hours with them teaching them how to pray. One word at a time. One phrase at a time. Until they had the entire prayer memorized, each helping the others when they lost their place.

The Bishop was pleased that they were finally praying correctly, so he gave them a blessing and returned to the ship.

As they resumed their journey, however, the captain of the ship noticed something on the sea between the ship and the island. As time passed, the captain and the Bishop noticed the object on the sea getting larger – as if approaching the ship. In a few short minutes, they could see that it was the three hermits walking on the water.

When they arrived at the ship, they explained that they had already forgotten the prayer the Bishop had taught them. They came seeking further instruction. Humbled, the Bishop assured them that the prayers they had been making before were sufficient and asked them to pray for him – no matter how they prayed.²

Clearly their actions spoke louder than their words.

² Leo Tolstoy, "The Three Hermits," *Walk in the Light and Twenty-Three Tales* (Plough Publishing, 1998), pp 253-260.

When read in context, this chapter of Paul’s letter is not a grand piece of romantic poetry, but rather is a very pointed reminder to people who have forgotten the commandment of Jesus to “love one another as I have loved you” (Jn. 13:34). When read in its context, in fact, the focus seems to be on the part of this chapter that is least often read at weddings, the last paragraph, beginning at verse 8.

Love never fails. As for prophecies, they will be brought to an end. As for tongues, they will stop. As for knowledge, it will be brought to an end. We know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, what is partial will be brought to an end. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, reason like a child, think like a child. But now that I have become [an adult], I’ve put an end to childish things. Now we see a reflection in a mirror; then we will see face-to-face. Now I know partially, but then I will know completely in the same way that I have been completely known. Now faith, hope, and love remain—these three things—and the greatest of these is love.

1 Cor. 13:8-13 (C.E.B.)

We all know people who carry pictures with them. Most of us carry them in our phones, now. There are pictures of our children and grandchildren. Pictures from our favorite vacation spot. Some people carry pictures of their dog while others carry photos of their boat. I have one of my lawnmower.

But those pictures are not the same as the real thing. A picture may tell a thousand words and it may help us know what something looks like, but it is not the same as the real thing.

Paul uses a mirror to capture that same thought, a “glass” in King James English. Except he reminds us that when we look in a mirror, we ought to be seeing a reflection of Christ. When Christ lives in us, others will see God’s love in us. God isn’t necessarily heard in the words we say, but in our actions.



Many years ago, I read a study on communication. It said that only about 25% of what we say is communicated through our words. Over half of what we say is communicated through body language and tone of voice – of course the study was done before the advent of Email and text messaging. And since our language continues to evolve over time, I’m sure those means of communicating will eventually change the dynamics of speech.

But it remains true that words and deeds are not the same thing. Just because a website promises to take your name off their “spam” list does not mean they will. Just because a politician says they will support our concerns doesn’t mean they will make changes. Actions speak louder than words.

We can say we love someone, but unless there are actions to follow it, the words become hollow and meaningless, “as sounding brass or tinkling cymbal,” in the King James Version (1 Cor. 13:1). It’s the activity that gives meaning to our faith.

That is no less true for you and me than it is for God. It’s why God sent Jesus.

Actions speak louder than words.

We may profess to support the work of justice, but until we act, it’s only words. And oftentimes, the work of justice means setting aside our privileges so that others may be received as equals.

What we do matters. It’s why Justice Together has invited us to join them on Thursday, for the Nehemiah Assembly at Century II. It’s a place for our actions to make a difference, to provoke action on the part of politicians.

It is love in action. It is charity in its best and purest form.

“And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three,” but the greatest of these is God’s love (1 Cor. 13:13a, KJV).

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Randy L Quinn
Hope Mennonite Church

Selected Bibliography

Hays, Richard B. *First Corinthians (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*. Louisville: John Knox, 1997.

Nighswander, Dan. *1 Corinthians (Believers Church Bible Commentary)*. Harrisonburg: Herald, 2017.

Quinn, Randy L. “Christianity in Action.” Sermon preached February 1, 2004 at Sunnyside; based on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (and published online at DesperatePreacher.com for the week of January 31, 2010).

_____. “Love Springs Eternal.” Sermon preached January 28, 2001 at Deer Park-Wild Rose; based on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

_____. “When the Complete Comes.” Sermon [not] preached February 1, 1998 at Allen Blanchard; based on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (I fell ill, and the Lay Leader ready my sermon for worship).