

The Power of Love
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Third Presbyterian Church
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I Corinthians 13:1-13

I grew up listening to music, lots and lots of music. I remember buying single records, 45's, for 79 cents, and playing them endlessly. I later bought record albums, for \$3.49 if I remember correctly. I didn't have many albums – the ones I did have I listened to endlessly. What I mostly did was listen to the radio, all the time. So much so that even though I never owned any records either by David Bowie or the Eagles, I could easily sing right now 10 or 15 or 20 songs by each, word for word, from memory. I won't...but I could.

Both Bowie and the Eagles were producing music, great pop music, in the wheelhouse of my musical growing up. They were very, very different. Bowie the avant-garde British artist, changing his persona, his music more eclectic and diverse. The Eagles, American, southern Californian, tight harmonies, guitar based. Bowie was a solo act. The Eagles were a group, with much of the drama a rock group provides. David Bowie died several days ago, and Glenn Frey – one of the co-founders of the Eagles – just a few days later. Bowie's death garnered more attention in the press as a framer of pop culture, but I can tell you that for many of us in my generation, both sets of music – Bowie cool and ethereal and the Eagles rhythmic and warm – equally shaped us.

I have spent time listening, in recent days, to music of the Eagles and David Bowie. No 45's or albums or eight tracks or CD's, even. Online. Listening and singing along, nostalgia in overdrive. And every so often, because I knew that this morning would have a focus on love, a lyric popped out. In "Rebel, Rebel," Bowie singing about unlikely love. "Hot tramp, I love you so." (Yes, I said "hot tramp" in a sermon!) Or in "Heroes," more traditionally: "I, I will be king/And you, you will be queen/Though nothing will drive them away/We can beat them, just for one day/We can be Heroes, just for one day." Or the cynicism of "Modern Love," a college favorite, with the cheeky lyric "get me to the church on time."

Or the Eagles telling the desperado that he had better "let somebody love you." Or any number of versions of love – unrequited, unsatisfying, imperfect, in "One of These Nights" or "Peaceful, Easy Feeling" or "Lyn' Eyes" or "Best of My Love."

Now I know that David Bowie and Glenn Frey – like Sinatra or Elvis or Adele, or Hollywood romances for that matter, don't define love for us. But as much as culture influences us, or doesn't, we know there are understandings of love out there. And by that I don't just mean romantic love as experienced by two individuals, but that is included in all this.

So perhaps I've taken a far too roundabout way to get to the point, but here it is. An alternative understanding of love, fueled by an alternative value system, that really does impact how couples live together, how families live together, how friends interact, how churches connect, how neighbors and citizens treat one another.

The sermon title was hatched a couple of months ago, and like many sermon titles, might have little to do with anything, let alone the actual sermon. Except I knew that I wanted to talk about I Corinthians 13, and love. It's a song title, of course, from another band with a much lesser cultural impact, Huey Lewis and the News. It's from a movie with huge impact. Do you remember "Back to the Future?" The power of love could have been Marty and his girlfriend, whose name I bet you don't remember (Jennifer). Or the unlikely love between his parents. Or the imperfect love between Marty and his parents. Or the love between Marty and Doc.

Which is the point of the power of love, this version, which is neither romantic nor sentimental but powerful and real, and fueled by an alternative value system that, for us, begins not with culture, but faith.

We have spent two weeks in I Corinthians, chapter 12, so we might as well keep going. Paul has been reminding us, insisting to us, that we are all gifted with gifts by the Spirit, and that those gifts are indispensable. Further, he uses the image of the body to remind us, insist to us, that we are all part of the body of Christ, and that every part is valued and needed and indispensable. He concludes by encouraging us to strive for the greater gifts, that we will be shown a still more excellent way.

Love is that way.

Nearly 2.3 million couples wed annually. A few of those weddings happen here, and I am privileged to preside over some of those. Every time, we discuss these words – I Corinthians 13. Some of the discussions will explore why a couple wants to include them, why they really, really want to include them. Some of the discussions will explore why they don't want to include them, why they really, really don't want to include them.

My response is something like this – whatever you want is fine, that while Paul probably didn't have a wedding in mind when he wrote these words to that early, struggling, conflicted church, that they certainly apply. And they apply more deeply than you might realize at that high wedding moment, because the love that Paul is considering here, as an outpouring of giftedness and our place in the body, is not the romantic kind of love of a wedding day, so very important, or a paper thin pop song, but a deeper kind of love, which would make a fine song title. A deeper kind of love.

There are several Greek words for love used in the New Testament. "Eros" is romantic love. "Philia" is brotherly or sisterly love. Here Paul uses "agape," self-giving love, sacrificial love.

Love that moves beyond self to other, to the world.

Look how Paul considers it. You could be the most articulate. You could have the deepest faith. You could be the most generous. That is to say, Paul is saying, remember all of those gifts I laid out for you? You could have them times a million, but if you do not have this love, this “agape” love,” it is nothing. Nothing.

Then he treats love as its own power, its own force, with a persona. Patient. Kind. Unlike other understandings of love, it is NOT many things – not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude or irritable or resentful. And then my favorite words, perhaps, in all of scripture: “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

That is true for any couple, of course, which is why it’s OK to read this at a wedding. But it would be fine to read it at a baptism as well, or a funeral. It would be fine to put this kind of love on the table, this sacrificial, giving love, at a political debate, or in a policy discussion, especially right now as candidates are tossing around their faith this way or that as a reason to cast a vote.

I was discussing public education with someone a month or two ago, and after wrestling with issues like poverty and gun violence and racism, he said to me: this is really about love. This is really about love. How we love one another.

Paul is speaking to a church, but he does not limit what this love looks like to church. The reasons to bring up all of those Eagles songs and David Bowie songs is to say that culture can talk about romantic love quite easily, but shies away from this, from love that gives and sacrifices, that is not boastful or envious or rude. Another song reminded us that what the world needs now is love, and I think that is right. Love that begins with love of neighbor, and especially when that neighbor is generally unwelcome and unwanted.

The King James Version of the Bible translated “agape” as charity, but that only gets it partly right. Charity can give things away without being committed, but “agape” links charity and compassion to make love. Richard Hays reminds us that we often mistake love for a feeling, but for Paul, love is an ethic, a way of living formed by character in community. (*I Corinthians*, pages 221-233) This love cares for, reaches out, binds together. In a fractured and factioned church and world, it unites. Love is the way we live out our lives, and the foundation from which we exercise our gifts. Hays writes: “if we attend closely to what Paul actually says...all sweetly sentimental notions of love will be dispelled and replaced by a vigorous notion of love that rejoices in the truth and bears all suffering in the name of Jesus Christ.”

Jan Richardson writes: “Loving is always risky, because we cannot enter into it without being changed. Altered. Transformed. In the face of this, we might well ask, Do I really want this? Do we really desire to be so undone? Loving is never just about opening our heart. It is about being willing to have our heart become larger as we make room for people and stories and experiences we never imagined holding. It is about being willing to have our heart become deeper as we move beyond the surface layers of our assumptions, prejudices, and habits in order to truly see and receive what—and who—is before us. It is about being willing to have our heart continually shattered and remade as we take in not only the brokenness of the world but also the beauty of it, the astounding wonder that will not allow us to remain the same.”

That is the love into which we are invited, more than a feeling or emotion and more than a set of behaviors. An ethic, a deep aspect of our character, a gift from God and a gift back to God. How we live with ourselves and how we live with others, in the same house, down the street, in the church, in the world.

Like many things, we can talk about it forever, but we will most know it as we experience it, as we receive it and give it away.

“And now faith, hope, and love abide,” Paul writes, “these three; and the greatest of these is love.” May it be so, that they will know we are Christians by our love. Amen.

