

**February 3, 2019**

**TEXT: [1 Corinthians 13](#)**

**TITLE: Tough Love**

*By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf*

I'll say it up front: This passage is a preacher's nightmare. For starters, it's too familiar. This is one of those passages that we've heard so many times that many of us could recite at least part of the text from memory. We've heard it so many times that it is, in many ways, hard to *hear* it, with fresh awareness. Some of us may have a strong sentimental attachment to these words that it is hard to hear them in a different context. But really, let's face it: nothing I will say will be as poetic, as profound or as perfect as the words that we just heard today.

It seems odd to hear these words on a Sunday morning. We are accustomed to hearing these words within the context of a wedding ceremony, as a loving couple professes their love to one another. We hear it in this context—wearing our finest clothes, filled with joy and hope, knowing that champagne toasts and dancing is soon to come.

And most often when I preach on these words, I am preaching in this context—using Paul's words as a charge to the couple, reminding them that love is more than a sentiment or a feeling. Rather, Paul invites them, and us, to live out the quality of love that he describes. I say that love is to be enacted, *embodied*, even. I remind them that this tall charge is possible because God's love for us was enacted, embodied, *incarnated*- in Christ who took on flesh and dwelled among us, to heal us of brokenness, free us of sin and show us how to live reconciled to God, to neighbor, and even to ourselves.

Then I invite the couple to follow me up these steps to the center of the chancel, to stand on the Jerusalem cross at the center, as we had practiced the night before, and make promises to one another to bind their lives together as one. And, then, before God and a crowd of witnesses, they promise is to love one another for as long as they both shall live.

Now, this is good—it's *beautiful*, really. Paul's words contain wonderful wisdom for married life.

But the truth is that Paul's words were not written as an address to a loving couple as they started their journey ahead. Paul was writing to the *church*.

The church in Corinth was struggling. This diverse community was squabbling about how to be one church in the midst of all of their difference. There were arguments over whose baptism was better—was it more effective to have been baptized by Cephas or Apollos. There were arguments over whose gifts were more important. Were those who spoke in tongues more important than those who prophesied? Were those who prophesied holier than those who healed? There was a lot of competition going on

among a diverse church made up of people whose journeys to faith were unique and profound.

They were people who likely by and large wanted to do their best, but who— much like James and John who wanted to be assured of their place to Jesus' right and left—were more focused on what their gifts said about THEMSELVES than about God. They were more concerned about how these gifts made them look rather than how they were to use their gifts to serve another or build up the community, or reach out to the world.

And so Paul steps in to set things straight.

Paul teaches that without love, these gifts are meaningless. Without love, the gifts are hollow worthless. Love is the force behind these gifts that brings transformation, wisdom, faithfulness, wholeness. Love is the most excellent way. All riches, power, fame, talent, pales in comparison to love. All gifts of faith, all calls to serve, all manifestations of the Holy Spirit pale without love.

Paul reminds them that love is not a sentiment to be felt but a quality to be enacted. And love, when done right, isn't easy. It stretches us, it makes us uncomfortable, because it requires of us so much. But it makes things better. It heals, it forgives, it perseveres.

Love is hard work. Things like patience and kindness and endurance...things that are tricky when you're offering them to someone you like, something trickier when you're called to direct them to someone you can't stand. Jesus even reminds us that what credit is it to us to love someone who first loves you? Even sinners can do that! But to love someone you can't stand or don't know...well, that is different.

Sikh civil rights activist Valarie Kaur speaks of her work fighting injustice against people of color since 9/11. She speaks of love as the most transformative force in our world. She says: "Revolutionary love is the choice to enter into labor for others who do not look like us, for our opponents who hurt us and for ourselves. In this era of enormous rage, when the fires are burning all around us, I believe that revolutionary love is the call of our times."<sup>1</sup>

She tells the story when, as a child, Kaur was taught by her grandfather to "see no stranger... to see no enemy." Rather, she was taught to wonder about people... "And if I wonder about them, then I will listen to their stories even when it's hard. I will refuse to hate them even when they hate me. I will even vow to protect them when they are in harms way."

She goes on to tell the story of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh man who was the first person killed in a hate crime after September 11, standing outside of his Arizona gas station.

Fifteen years after his death, Kaur returned to the gas station and set a candle in the spot where he died. She says:

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/valarie\\_kaur\\_3\\_lessons\\_of\\_revolutionary\\_love\\_in\\_a\\_time\\_of\\_rage?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/valarie_kaur_3_lessons_of_revolutionary_love_in_a_time_of_rage?language=en)

His brother, Rana, turned to me and said, “Nothing has changed.” And I asked, “Who have we not yet tried to love.” We decided to call the murderer in prison. The phone rings. My heart is beating in my ears. I hear the voice of Frank Roque, a man who once said... “I’m going to go out and shoot some towel heads. We should kill their children too.” And every emotional impulse in me says, “I can’t.” It becomes an act of will to wonder. “Why?” I ask. “Why did you agree to speak with us?”

Frank says, “I’m sorry for what happened, but I’m also sorry for all the people killed on 9/11.” He fails to take responsibility.

I become angry to protect Rana, but Rana is still wondering about Frank—listening—responds. “Frank, this is the first time I’m hearing you say that you feel sorry.” And Frank—Frank says, “Yes, I am sorry for what I did to your brother. One day when I go to heaven to be judged by God I will ask to see your brother. And I will hug him. And I will ask him forgiveness.” And Rana says... “We already forgave you.”

Kaur reminds her listeners that forgiving isn’t forgetting. Forgiving isn’t even healing. But, she says: “We love our opponents when we tend the wound in them.”

I don’t know about you, but my husband can tell you that I have a hard time loving him well when I am tired or hangry or overwhelmed. I get snippy. I get demanding. I am certain that I am correct in any argument.

And I sometimes have a hard time loving myself well when I’m doing right by another person. When cradling my son for hours in the night through an ear infection, I still haven’t found a way to get enough sleep myself. And even as I love this precious little human well, I am constantly reminded that loving him well is very hard work.

And, frankly, as much as I love all of you, I fall short as a pastor. I don’t always get to the hospital to visit someone who is sick when the newsletter articles are due or if club 116 is later that night. I say things wrong. I forget to pray.

So if I struggle to love my family well, love the church well, and even love myself well—how on earth can I be expected to love my *enemy*?

I believe that Paul’s challenge to the church in Corinth and Kaur’s challenge toward Revolutionary Love is a challenge to us today. I believe that we need this call desperately, as the pain in our world is evident each day.

As a congregation, we may strive to be known by our inclusivity and our mission outreach. We may strive to be known by our diversity, our music program, our arts academy and our ministry to kids. And yes, all of these reflect an ability of us to love, to heed God’s call, to share God’s love, to affirm the worth and value of all of God’s children. And this is good. It is *very* good.

But the words we heard remind me to wonder:

*Who have we not yet tried to love?*

What might we wonder about them? How might their stories change ours?

How might *our* stories change theirs? How might love change the world?

*Who have we not yet tried to love?*

As we know all too well, this world is full of division. We see on the news each night a rise in hate crimes; we witness political impassions along party lines; we see racism, sexism, heterosexism, cis-sexism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism flourishing, and we are shocked by the many ways in which it continues to be sanctioned among those who should be invested in eradicating these institutions of hate in our midst.

The 1965 pop song has it right: “What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It’s the only thing that there’s just too little of.”

And so then, I am challenged to ask: who have WE not yet tried to love?

As a congregation we are known by our inclusivity and our mission outreach. We are known by our diversity, our music program, our arts academy and our ministry to kids. And yes, all of these reflect an ability to us to love, to heed God’s call, to share God’s love, to affirm the worth and value of all of God’s children.

And this is good. In fact, it is *very* good.

But if we want to grow in faith together, perhaps we too should ask:

*Who have we not yet tried to love?*

What might we wonder about them?

How might their stories change ours?

How might our stories change theirs?

*Who have we not yet tried to love?*

Friends, we are the Body of Christ. In a few moments we will gather around the communion table. We will share bread and drink from the cup, and in doing so we will bear witness to the reality we profess: that we are one in Christ; that we are united with people in all paces and of all times who share of this feast. We profess that we believe that God shows up not just in the elements, but in *us*—in the act of coming together, of

worshipping and serving alongside those who are different from us and with those who push us to grow.

The challenge before us is to ask the question of ourselves, together. "Who have we not yet tried to love?"

And then to listen.

And then to be willing to respond.

Because, the optimist in me can't help but wonder how God might be able to change the world through us, through our questions, through our ability to listen, through our wiliness to respond. I think it is truly possible by God's grace.

By God's grace, my friends, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

May it be so.