

The Plumb Line

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. **2** And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. **3** If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant **5** or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; **6** it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. **7** It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. **9** For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, **10** but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. **11** 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. **12** For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. **13** And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

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On Monday of last week, Kim Provo and I stood outside watching a utility worker use a plumb line. I was transfixed, I tell you. Perhaps not transfixed by the plumb line itself, but thrilled as something very simple and very

important happened at Pilgrim Church. A new telephone pole was being installed just in front of our building. This is one of the steps needed to connect our solar panels to the grid and we knew they were coming, but not when. When I drove up on Monday, there were three very large vehicles and a long trailer with a very tall pole on the back, and six utility workers in our driveway. I ran around telling all of them how excited we were to see them and how much we appreciated their work. When the pole trailer was backed into place, Kim and I ran outside to watch the pole be levered upright and then lowered into the ground. When the workers stepped away, Kim commented that it was crooked. Seriously crooked, like ten degrees off. We thought we were pretty far away and maybe we didn't have a good view, and maybe we had it wrong - but this was not perpendicular to the ground. A few minutes later one of the workers brought out a plumb line and called out to the rest of the crew to move the pole a little this way, a little that way, until it was at least reasonably close to straight up and down. If you're in person today you can check it out and see if you think it's vertical.

A plumb line is a way to measure.

Paul is giving a plumb line, a way of measuring, a way of evaluating, to the churches at Corinth.

He's given them a pretty complicated set of instructions already (and to be honest, some parts of those instructions we in 2024 disagree with). And then he's told them about all the wonderful gifts that the Spirit might give them. Wisdom and knowledge and faith and healing; prophecy and discernment and speaking in tongues and translating people speaking in tongues. Paul has pointed out that a community needs a variety of gifts - no one person is going to be able to do everything God asks of Christians, but when you are part of a Christian community, you don't have to do it all. You do your part and cooperate with others and together the community can thrive.

However, in our chapter today, Paul says there's one thing every follower of Christ must have. Whether you're a prophet or a healer or wise or smart or whatever, you need this one thing. One way of being for every Christian. One measure for every individual and every church.

This is the plumb line. Love is the one requirement.

Love. Not love, the emotion, the way you feel. Not love in the romantic sense (eros). Not love in the family sense (philia). Writing in Greek Paul is able to be very specific about the kind of love he means. It's *agape* love - the kind of love the Gospels tell us Jesus commanded of his followers, the kind of love that becomes a name for God. *Agape*.

Agape is "unconditional love born by the Holy Spirit."¹ Agape was an obscure word that Greek speakers in the ancient near east didn't use very often - until followers of the way of Jesus lifted it up. Indeed, to live according to the plumb line of agape love was radically different from the norms of Roman culture - almost as different as it is from 21st century US cultural norms. To practice agape love is to practice self-giving love that wants the wellbeing of others. Agape love is other-focused and self-giving. Agape love is neighbor love. Agape love aims us toward the kingdom of God, not any earthly kingdom or gain. Agape love is the New Testament word that gets closest, I think, to the meaning of the Hebrew word *chesed*, loving kindness.

When Paul sent out his letters to all the little churches he guided, he called them beloved. *Agapetos*. God loved them with an agape love and Paul said, You who are loved, you are able to practice love the way God in Jesus did: with mercy and compassion and grace. Beloved, be loving.

So in Chapter 13, the love chapter, Paul says - whatever else you do in faith, whatever else you do in this world, however simple or fancy your life is, whatever spiritual gifts you have, none of it matters unless you love.

¹ https://img.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/article_pdf.php?aid=33605

Agape is the plumb line.

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If I am the pastor, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I drive an electric car but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I teach at Harvard but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I rush here and there, busy and important, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I can win any argument but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I plant the most beautiful flowers but do not have love, I am nothing.

If my house is big, if my bank account is flush, if I walk six miles in the woods but do not have love, I am nothing.

Ah, but...

If I live in a tent but meet every person with kindness, I am plumb.

If I face a decision about how to act or be in the world, and one way is more kind, more merciful, more loving - the choice is clear.

If I have nothing at all except love, I have everything.

And love, the *agape* love of which Paul speaks, is a great equalizer. None of us have all the spiritual gifts or all the worldly ones, either - but all of us have the capacity to love. And love is everything.

As Mother Teresa said, “Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love.”

And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

Beloved, be loving.

Amen.