

From the Wall to the Street

I CORINTHIANS 13:1-13 (NRSV) *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And 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. ³If 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. ⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love 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. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When 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. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, 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. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

Without a doubt, this is one of the most beloved passages in the Bible. Beautiful words, sometimes enshrined in intricate needlework, or handwritten calligraphy on parchment, suitably framed and hanging prominently on the wall. Unfortunately, we see it much more often on the wall than on the street.

The words, indeed, are beautiful; but adoration for the poetic beauty of the words too often obscures its practical call to a new way of living. The church in Corinth was bitterly embroiled in conflict: arguing over the relative validity of each previous pastor ("I am of Apollos!" "I follow Paul!" "Peter had it right!")

The people were fighting over whose baptism was real. They fought over spiritual gifts—whose were the most important (apparently the gift of speaking in tongues was the one everybody wanted. Paul said it was the least of all the gifts.)

Even the Lord's Supper was a point of controversy. Back then it wasn't just a morsel of bread and a sip of juice; it was a meal—the Agape Feast—the Feast of Love. Evidently each family brought its own meal (centuries later the Baptists would invent 'potluck.') Apparently, there was competitiveness—whose meal was fanciest: linen tablecloths and napkins—*Foie gras* and caviar on bone China—Italian wine in silver goblets (some actually got drunk!) Poor families brought sardines in a brown paper sack—or they didn't bring anything at all, and went hungry.

Paul wrote to them and said, "You're an embarrassment to me and to God! Thank God I didn't baptize any of you, except Crispus and Gaius! And when you meet it's not the Lord's Supper you eat! Agape? It's a joke: some get drunk; some go hungry? And quit beating each other over the head with your spiritual gifts! God gives different gifts to each Christian, and it takes them all to have a church.

"Go ahead and seek the spiritual gift that's right for you, and I will show you and even more excellent way: *"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do*

not have love [and the word is "Agape"], I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

Calligraphy on parchment framed on the wall more likely is perceived and revered as "Eros:" romantic love—holding hands in the moonlight, or maybe "Philos:" brotherly love—love of those who are like us, family, USA, Rotary Club...

But taken off the wall and placed on the street in downtown Corinth, or Atlanta, or Kansas City, or Conway, the focus is more sharply defined:

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful...**

*NLT: "...keeps no record of being wronged."

NIV, CEV, & GNT: "...keeps no record of wrongs."

ERV: "...does not remember wrongs done against it."

AMP: "...does not take into account a wrong *endured*."

ROBINSON: "...does not hold grudges."

Suddenly love is not framed and hanging lifelessly on some wall. It's on the street, interacting with people, some of whom are not like us, don't think like we think, and (God forbid!) may even disagree with us. And suddenly, love is not about rosebuds and moonlight; it's about living selflessly for the benefit of others and for the benefit of the whole.

And here's the thing: all of this is because God is love! I Cor 13 describes God: *God is patient; God is kind; God is not envious or boastful or arrogant⁵ or rude.*

David Artman, friend and colleague who followed me at Harrison, writes: "Love is not just one part of God's nature, but the essence of God's nature. This means God's love is not coerced or forced. God freely loves out of the deepest essence of God's own being. Love is not what motivates God at certain moments and then not at others. Whatever God is doing is always necessarily rooted in God's essential character as love."¹

Now, stay with me: we are created in that same image: the image of God—the image of love. Love is not so much what we are called to do as it is who we are created to be—the basis and foundation of all we are and all we do: our ethics, our moral standards, our relationships with people and groups, and, yes, our politics...

Therefore, the writer of the first Epistle of John is bold to say, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." (4:8) And a few verses later: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate [*remember that word*] their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

Jesus lays it on even thicker: "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." (Matt. 5:43-45)

This word, "hate," appears in both passages. The word in the original language implies not so much an active hatred as a passive indifference.

It's the same word Jesus uses in Luke 14 when he says, "Whoever comes to

me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." (14:28)

OF COURSE, Jesus would never have us hate our parents or siblings, or anybody else, as we understand the word, "hate." The New Testament word is about a comparative choice: to love "this" less than "that." It's a matter of setting priorities, which Jesus sums up in Matthew 6: "Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and everything else will fall into place." The best thing you can do—the *BEST* thing you do for your parents or your siblings or your spouse or children or your career... is to put God first in your life, which is another way of saying make love the supreme value in your life—get love off the wall and onto the street.

"Agape." It's such a special word. It has nothing to do—directly—with feelings or emotions. Oh, there are feelings associated with Agape, but feelings are neither its motivation nor its substance nor its consequence. Agape is self-giving, and often even self-sacrificial. It indicates a conscious action rather than an emotion or feeling, and has been defined as "an unconditional commitment to actively pursue and secure the good of another, even at personal cost to oneself."

It's found 137 times in the New Testament but rarely in other Greco-Roman works. It describes the love God offers ["God ἠγάπησεν the world thus: he gave his only begotten son..."]; indeed, it describes who God is ["...God is ἀγαπῶν."] And its greatest demonstration is the cross of Jesus. It's "street language."

A little girl had leukemia, and without a blood transfusion she would die. Neither of her parents were a match for her blood type, so they turned to her 8-year-old brother, and asked if they could test his blood. He said sure; and it was a match. So, they asked if he'd give her a pint of blood, and that it could be her only chance of living. He thought about it awhile and said, of course, he'd do it.

So they took him to the hospital where he was put on a gurney beside his six-year-old sister. Both of them were hooked up to IVs. A nurse withdrew a pint of his blood and put in the girl's IV. The boy lay on his gurney in silence while the blood dripped into his sister, until the doctor came over to see how he was doing. The boy opened his eyes and asked, "How soon until I start to die?" Of course, one doesn't die from giving a pint of blood; but he didn't know that; and he was willing.

That's Agape, without which, *"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have agape, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And 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 agape, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have agape, I gain nothing."* [Prayer Slide]

¹ Artman, David. *Grace Saves All: The Necessity of Christian Universalism* (p. 3). Wipf and Stock, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition.