

How Can We Love?



Cimabu , Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Co-missioners,

Three Sundays ago Pastor Chris Repp preached on 1 Corinthians 13 at Grace Lutheran, the congregation he serves in Champaign, Illinois. He shared his sermon with us a few days later. We

couldn't help but share it with you. Here is the antidote to every harangue you've ever gotten on the topic of love that left you hanging your head for not loving enough.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

—

How Can We Love?
A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 13
by Christopher Repp

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Faith, hope, and love abide, these three. And the greatest of these is love.” That’s got to be one of the most well-known verses in all of the Bible. This second reading of ours this morning gets used all the time at weddings. In fact, it was read at the last wedding we had at Grace back in November. And no wonder. “The greatest of these is love.”

What could be better than that, especially when it comes to a young couple pledging to share the rest of their lives with each other? Especially when we know that “God is love,” as the first letter of John tells us. And the greatest commandment? Jesus told us. Love God—with all your heart, soul, and mind. And love your neighbor, too, he had to add, as you love yourself, suggesting that loving God and loving other people go hand in hand. So it seems pretty undeniable that love is what our faith in God is all about, the ultimate point of everything we do.



Photo by [bhuvanesh gupta](#) on [Unsplash](#)

In fact, if you were asked what the central task of the church is, you might well decide that it is to love our neighbors—to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, free the oppressed. Wasn't that the basic message of Jesus' inaugural address that we heard in the Gospel reading last week and continues in today's Gospel reading? These things, Jesus said, are being fulfilled in him. And in our second reading last week, of which today's second reading is also a continuation, Paul told us that we are the body of Christ. So it makes sense, then, that loving others is what we as his body are all about.

You might be surprised, then, and maybe a little disappointed that I had a disagreement with another pastor this past week on social media about this very thing. He claimed that the central task of the church was loving our neighbors. And I disagreed.

Except I didn't tell him that I disagreed, because we had already disagreed about something else, and I didn't know him personally. I have learned that social media is not the place to have healthy, constructive disagreements with people I don't know. So I let it go, thinking that it might be better to discuss it with you instead.

So why on earth would I disagree that love is the central task of the church? It's not because I don't think that love is God's ultimate goal for us. I think it is. It's not that I disagree with Paul here that love is essential, and even greater than faith and hope. I don't disagree at all. It's that I think that calling loving our neighbor the church's central task is putting the cart before the horse, as that old expression puts it. And that's because it doesn't get us where we think it will. A careful reading of the Bible and of our Lutheran confessional documents shows us that the nature of love is such that it cannot simply be commanded and obeyed. It can't be made into a checklist and followed. Love is more complicated than that. In fact, the Bible is full of stories about how it just doesn't work to command love.

Take the Ten Commandments, for instance, which the Jewish tradition summed up as being essentially commands to love God and love the neighbor. (Jesus didn't invent that idea. It was a common way of interpreting the Commandments well before he came along.) And how did that work out for God's chosen people, those to whom the Ten Commandments were given? Not well. They did not love God or their neighbors. The history of Israel and Judah is a history of them turning to other gods and taking advantage of the neighbor.

Even when they thought they could keep the commandments, it turned out there was something missing. The classic example is that of the rich young man who came to Jesus asking what he

needed to do to inherit eternal life. Keep the commandments, Jesus answered. I've done that, he responded. Great, says Jesus. Just one more thing. Use your riches to love your neighbor—sell what you have and give the proceeds to the poor. But he couldn't do it. He went away grieving because he had many possessions and couldn't give them up.

And then there's today's text from 1 Corinthians. But before I get to that, I know there are some of you who are saying, "wait a minute, what about Jesus' 'New Commandment' in the Gospel of John telling his disciples to "love one another as I have loved you"? Wasn't that a task that Jesus commanded his disciples to do? The *only* thing he commanded them to do in John's Gospel besides "believe in me"? Good point. But a closer look will reveal first that that is about *love within the community of believers* and not about loving the neighbor, and second that Jesus' followers didn't do so well with that commandment either. And maybe that's because love is really difficult when you think about it as a task to accomplish.

That gets us back to our 1 Corinthians text. There's a whole lot to talk about here, but I want to lift up just two things.



Love is patient (from Canva)

First is Paul's list of things that love *doesn't* do, particularly that love does not rejoice in wrongdoing. As many times as I have read and heard this passage, that one never struck me as difficult. "Of course! Who rejoices in wrongdoing? Not me!" But this time around it hit me. Few people rejoice in their *own* wrongdoing. But all of us, I dare say, rejoice in the wrongdoing of others, particularly those we don't like. It's how social media and cable news make their fortunes, by stirring up our outrage at the horrible things "those people" are doing. It makes us look better by comparison, and so we pray the prayer of the Pharisee, "thank you God that I am not like other people!" while patting ourselves on the back.

Second, in the first part of our reading I hear Paul echoing the story I mentioned a moment ago about the rich young man and Jesus. Even if that rich young man had gone and done just what Jesus suggested, sold all of his possessions and given the proceeds to the poor, but did so grudgingly or boastfully, it would have meant nothing, and would not have been what Jesus intended.

And that's because all of these characteristics of love that Paul so carefully lays out for us in this chapter are not rules for how we are to love. They are more like a diagnostic, a mirror to show us what love looks like, or what it doesn't look like—so that we know it when we see it, and when we don't. Patience, kindness, and humility? Yes, love looks like that. Envy and arrogance? Not so much. How are you looking in that mirror today? Do you like what you see? Or have you suddenly noticed all the ways you might not be very loving in your day-to-day interactions with others?

If the central task of the church was to love our neighbors, then my job this morning would be to whip you into shape, to exhort you get out there and "be more loving." And you would

then be saying, maybe quietly to yourself, “who are you to tell me what to do?” Or maybe, like the crowd in the Gospel reading, you’d be saying, “why don’t you take a dose of your own medicine, you who are so clever and pious?” And then we would each go on our ways, resentfully resolving to maybe try a little harder, but not very happy about it. And how do you think that would work out for us?

But the central task of the church is instead what Paul tells up front, at the very beginning of this letter to the Corinthians, where he sets the context for everything else he writes to them. The central task of the church is proclaiming Christ crucified, that great, foolish, reckless, loving act of God on our behalf that frees us from the power of sin, death, and evil and opens to us the way to life as God has intended all along. In Jesus Christ, God comes among us as one of us to love us back into right relationship with God, taking on our nature and our lot, as one of our Eucharistic prayers puts it, and giving us the gift of life that really is life, life shared with God, and all whom God loves—which, you might remember, is the world.

We can love only because God has first loved us. Love is not a task we can resolve to do, not a commandment we can obey. Instead, it’s a response to the love of another who has opened our hearts to God and to the world that God loves. When we begin to trust the promise of God’s great love for us in Jesus Christ, we will be drawn out of ourselves and into a loving attitude toward the world around us. We’ll begin to look out for the needs and concerns not only of friends and family, but even of complete strangers, whom we have come to see through the eyes and heart of our Lord.

And what might this loving attitude look like? Justice, maybe? Fairness? Civil rights? To be sure, but only for starters. Those things are the bare minimum that any decent society should

expect for everyone. But we'll want so much more for them. We'll look for ways to help them thrive, to live lives of integrity and honor, and to become partners and friends with us in caring for the world that God has entrusted to us.

Imagine the possibilities. Imagine the opportunities! And then we'll laugh at the idea of love being our task. We'll laugh because what else would we possibly want to do? We won't need to be told to love our neighbor. We won't be able to help it.

May God then grant us grace to be faithful to our task of proclaiming Christ crucified, so that we come to trust the promise of life in his name and live out this faith in lives of generous, joyful love.

And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use

A publication of the Crossings Community