



You have often seen this visual illustration, but I want to use it in a different way. Is this glass half full or half empty? I'm not asking if you are an optimist or a pessimist (although most people saw the glass as half full, if that means anything), but to point out there is actually a rather glaring fallacy in that question, and it is this – maybe I have the wrong size glass. I can pour the water into this smaller glass and it is completely full. Or, I can pour it back into the larger glass and then add more water to make that glass full. Or I can drink it down to whatever level I choose. We are often conditioned to think in narrow categories – is the glass half full or half empty? Is an opinion right or wrong? Is a person good or bad? What if, however, there are other options rather than the two we are so often presented? What if the idea of having only two options – which is more and more the case these days – is simply not accurate? An opinion might not be either right or wrong, but a mixture of both. A person might not fit the category of good or bad, but might be a combination of both (which is the case of all us, I believe). Here is the point I am trying to make – language is not always defined as much as it is assumed, and we might be assuming the wrong things because we have not adequately defined the language we use. This is the root of many of our communication problems, as we do not all define language in the same way. We believe we are speaking the same language when we talk to one another, but often we are not.

In a recent *New York Times* OpEd by Jonathan Merritt, titled *It's Getting Harder to Talk About God* (October 13, 2018), he writes that in our country, we are losing our capacity to talk about God because we are losing our sense of shared language about God. I believe this is an important point to consider. Maybe a good many of our problems today, in terms of dealing with one another, come about because we do not speak the same language, in terms of how we define our language. Even though we use the same words, we have very different ways of using and understanding those words.

This morning we continue our series on I Corinthians 13, I want us to think about the ways in which we need to learn to speak the same language when we speak of love. Love means many different things to many different people. Even in churches, we might not all define love in the same manner. As I read I Corinthians 13, I will read it from a translation with which you might not be familiar. It is a translation called *The Message*, a translation by Eugene Peterson, a scholar and Presbyterian minister who just days ago, unfortunately, went into hospice care (he passed away on Monday). I really like this translation, and it is one I turn to often when I need a fresh perspective on a verse or passage I'm struggling to understand. Reading the Bible in contemporary expressions of language can help us to better understand a verse that might be otherwise difficult to understand. As a bit of trivia, if you are familiar with the Christian band For King & Country, their song *The Proof of Your Love* uses this translation of I Corinthians 13 in the spoken portion of that song.

Follow along with me as I read I Corinthians 13:1-13 –

1 If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a

rusty gate.

2 If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing.

3-7 If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

Love never gives up.

Love cares more for others than for self.

Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.

Love doesn't strut,

Doesn't have a swelled head,

Doesn't force itself on others,

Isn't always "me first,"

Doesn't fly off the handle,

Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,

Doesn't revel when others grovel,

Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,

Puts up with anything,

Trusts God always,

Always looks for the best,

Never looks back,

But keeps going to the end.

8-10 Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be canceled.

11 When I was an infant, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good.

12 We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!

13 But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.

Do you like that version? I love it.

I want to focus again this week on verses 4 – 7, where Paul gives us a language for the meaning of Christian love. Christian love was not like the understanding of love that was common throughout the Roman Empire, so as Paul was writing to and working with new congregations all over the Empire – congregations that had people with little or not understanding of Christianity – he had to define for them the language of faith, and one of the most basic tenants of that faith was, and remains, love. When you read I Corinthians 13 it is important to remember, then, that Paul isn't simply writing a beautiful passage about love. For Paul, these words were very, very practical; they were a definition of love for people who needed a definition of love.

When Paul wrote these words, one of the things he was doing was defining love so that there would be a common understanding of what, exactly, is meant by Christian love. We need to remember that, in Paul's day, most people who were part of the church had very little idea of what it meant to be a Christian. We are the beneficiaries of 2,000 years of Christian teaching and Christian theology that defined language and ways of thinking, but the earliest followers of Jesus did not have that advantage,

so for Paul, one of the necessities was to develop a common language for love and what it meant to love in the name of Jesus. Now, that may seem very basic – and even unnecessary – for us, but it was very important and very necessary for Paul

But even today, we do not always speak the same language when we discuss a topic. Love means many different things to many different people. Would, for instance, love mean the same to a young couple who are dating as it would to a couple married for fifty years? That is not to demean a young couple and their relationship in any way, but time and the difficulties and struggles that come over time will change how we perceive love. It is not possible, I believe, for someone who is a teenager to conceptualize or understand love in the same way an eighty year old would know love.

It's always easier for my brain to deal with information when I can put it in some kind of framework, such as several points to hang the information on, so in that usual fashion, I will do that this morning.

Love Is Treating People With Dignity, Respect, and Equality.

We can add a lot of other adjectives to that short list, but it would mostly be synonyms of those three.

Even in churches, amazingly enough, we do not all mean the same things when we use the same words, and love is a good example of this. While some churches would preach that we should love everyone, they have not always done this in practical terms. In generations past, for example, some churches would preach love but fail to condemn slavery. Today, some churches still treat women as though they are second-class citizens, forbidding them from holding positions of leadership or teaching males above a certain age. When Paul wrote about love, love did not mean equality for many people in the Roman Empire; indeed, it did not mean equality for most people. Love, certainly as expressed in equality, was not for women, for the many slaves throughout the Empire, for children, and not for non-citizens. The egalitarian nature of love, as expressed by the early church, was something very different from what was meant by love in the Roman Empire. The equality demonstrated by the early church was offensive to many throughout the Empire and it was seen as a threat to the security and foundations of the Empire. Treating people equally would, among other things, undermine the entire way of commerce that was a financial underpinning of the Empire.

The world was a tough place, and church became a refuge and a respite. Everyone could belong, and they were ridiculed for that radical kind of welcome. How often is it today, unfortunately, that some churches are known more for whom they do not welcome and are ridiculed for their lack of welcome rather than their radical welcoming?

I was at our Regional Assembly on Friday, and in the middle of the afternoon we were listening to reports, and let's be honest, listening to a bunch of institutional reports is not the most exciting moments. When they began, the highlight for me was looking a few rows over and seeing one of my ministerial colleagues falling fast asleep, and thinking *I'm so glad it's not me for a change!* But then it got very interesting, as they had a group of six people on stage and talking about the work of the institutions they led, especially when it came to Lexington Theological Seminary, and Charisse Gillett began to speak. One of the things she said was this, and this is a bit of a paraphrase – *Lexington Theological Seminary was founded in 1865, at the end of the Civil War, when African-Americans had not rights and many were still enslaved, and women also had very few rights. Who could have imagined, then, that this seminary would one day have as a president an African-American woman?* That reminds us of two things – the church has not always lived up to its calling of love as expressed through equality, dignity, and respect, but that calling always calls us to put that into practice!

Some people would not associate with Jesus because he affiliated with sinners. They were offended by the associations of Jesus. We ought to offend people by our associations. We ought not be afraid of criticism because of a radically, welcoming love; we ought to welcome that criticism and wear it as a badge of honor! People often criticize churches for having hypocrites in our midst. You know what that

means? It means we're doing our job! We ought to attract hypocrites, and sinners, and losers, and strugglers, and scoundrels, because that's who Jesus attracted, and we ought to say we will treat them with the same love as anyone else!

Love Is A Choice.

How often do we "feel" like what Paul lists in verses 4 – 7? Ever? Also while I was at the Regional Assembly on Friday, I went into the sanctuary at Beargrass Christian Church during a break, when the sanctuary was mostly empty, to sit in quiet for a few minutes. I sat down in one of the pews and noticed there was an empty plastic container, and the label on the container was *mixed nuts*. I couldn't help but think how appropriate that was, because in some ways, that is the church – a bunch of mixed nuts! How else would you describe a group of people who follow Jesus, who told us the first shall be last, that if you want to be great you have to be a servant, that we are to love for our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, and all manner of other commands that are crazy in the eyes of the larger culture?

Love is a choice. Love has an emotional component but if that is all there is, love will never last, and Paul says that *love never fails*. I'll tell you this – if it's nothing but emotion it certainly will fail, because as wonderful as emotions are – especially in love – emotions ebb and flow, they cool down, they disappear for sometimes long stretches of time, and that's when you make the choice that love will continue.

After all, who really wants to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecute us? I can answer that question for you – none of us! Let's be honest, do we want to do that? If we depend upon an emotional feeling to get us to that point we are in real trouble, but we can make a choice, and that choice does not have to depend upon the whims of emotion.

Love Is Restorative.

I was reading an article recently that asked the question, *what do we do with people who have had public failures?* What do we do with them? How do we restore them. Paul says very simply that *love doesn't keep score of the sins of others*. The Christian faith is restorative, but we live in a time and day in which people's lives are destroyed as though it is a sport to do so and the idea that they could ever be restored is beyond comprehension. Imagine Peter, for instance, if he were alive today, and especially if he decided to run for elected office. Can you imagine the attack ads that would come out against him? *You can't depend on Peter. He failed his friend Jesus. He denied him three times. Do you want to elect someone who you can't trust to stand with you when things get tough? Is this the kind of person you want walking the halls of Congress?*

Now, it does not mean that someone who is abusive would be put into a position where they could do so again. What restoration does mean is that we believe people are not disposable, and that everyone makes mistakes, but we work to restore them because that is a defining attribute of Christian love.

On Saturday morning I attended the board meeting of Mission Behind Bars and Beyond (MB3). MB3 is the ministry that sponsors the church at the Diersen Center, where we lead worship several times a year, and where we will lead worship next month, if you would like to attend with us. I am a great admirer of the work of MB3 and believe very much in their ministry, because they are doing the work of restoration. Restoration is the heart of the gospel, as the ministry of Jesus was about restoring people and restoring our relationship with God. We talk in those meetings a lot about how we can help bring people back into society, and that's tough, because it's very difficult when you have a record of incarceration. The great part of MB3's work is that when the individuals in the facilities where MB3 ministers, when those individuals are involved with the ministry of MB3, the recidivism rate declines dramatically, because of the work of restoration. Here's a problem we have as a society – we are great at punishment, but not so good at restoration. We can lock people away very effectively, but as a

society we don't really know how to do the work of restoration, but faith does, because restoration is at the heart of what we are called to do. Christian love is restorative. It never says, *because of what you have done you are finished. You're going to have to survive the best you can on your own. From here on out you are ostracized and we are done with you.* Christian love does not do this. Christian love says that however small is the offense or however large is the offense, the goal of love is restoration.

This is why we must define love, because some will define love as going only so far, but Christian love does not have a limit or any lines that it will not cross. I imagine that some of the first readers and hearers of these words that Paul wrote might have been thinking *wait a minute; this is not what we were thinking. This is really tough. Are you sure this is what you want from us?* Yes, it is, because that's the kind of love that God asks of us.