



Though I don't remember who it was, or the circumstances in which it was said, someone once told me, *you know Dave, you have basically one sermon. Every sermon you preach follows the same theme.* I don't know if they meant that as a criticism or as a compliment, but either way I would say it's basically true. All of what I have attempted to say over the years, at times in very muddled and stumbling ways, has been about the love of God. That's pretty much my one theme. I decided long ago if I was going to have one basic theme in my sermons that ought to be it—the love of God. That doesn't mean I consciously ignore other themes, but everything comes back to the love of God as primary because that is the great theme of Scripture and of our faith. And I know it sounds overly simplistic to say that everything ought to come back to the love of God, but the truth is, it is easy to get sidetracked into other matters, and that often happens in churches. So if I have one theme in my messages, if we have one approach in all of our ministries, and if we have one theme in our worship services, let's have it be the theme of the love of God, because that's what it ought to be, and everything else we do and say should be a way to help us to better understand and to live that one basic truth.

Continuing with our series of messages from I Corinthians 13, that is the theme – the love of God. Paul has a lot of underlying themes in this passage, but love and the love of God is *the* overriding theme. This morning I am going to read from a rather new translation that you probably have never heard of, and it is called The Passion Translation. Like The Message, it translates the words of this passage into language that sounds very different from what we are accustomed to hearing, but it is a very good translation, I believe.

#### I Corinthians 13:1-13 (The Passion Translation)

*1 If I were to speak with eloquence in earth's many languages, and in the heavenly tongues of angels, yet I didn't express myself with love, my words would be reduced to the hollow sound of nothing more than a clanging cymbal.*

*2 And if I were to have the gift of prophecy with a profound understanding of God's hidden secrets, and if I possessed unending supernatural knowledge, and if I had the greatest gift of faith that could move mountains, but have never learned to love, then I am nothing.*

*3 And if I were to be so generous as to give away everything I owned to feed the poor, and to offer my body to be burned as a martyr, without the pure motive of love, I would gain nothing of value.*

*4 Love is large and incredibly patient. Love is gentle and consistently kind to all. It refuses to be jealous when blessing comes to someone else. Love does not brag about one's achievements nor inflate its own*

importance.

*5 Love does not traffic in shame and disrespect, nor selfishly seek its own honor. Love is not easily irritated or quick to take offense.*

*6 Love joyfully celebrates honesty and finds no delight in what is wrong.*

*7 Love is a safe place of shelter, for it never stops believing the best for others. Love never takes failure as defeat, for it never gives up.*

*8 Love never stops loving. It extends beyond the gift of prophecy, which eventually fades away. It is more enduring than tongues, which will one day fall silent. Love remains long after words of knowledge are forgotten.*

*9 Our present knowledge and our prophecies are but partial, 10 but when love's perfection arrives, the partial will fade away.*

*11 When I was a child, I spoke about childish matters, for I saw things like a child and reasoned like a child. But the day came when I matured, and I set aside my childish ways.*

*12 For now we see but a faint reflection of riddles and mysteries as though reflected in a mirror, but one day we will see face-to-face. My understanding is incomplete now, but one day I will understand everything, just as everything about me has been fully understood.*

*13 Until then, there are three things that remain: faith, hope, and love—yet love surpasses them all. So above all else, let love be the beautiful prize for which you run.*

I like that version, and I hope that you do too.

This morning, I want to use verse 10 as a touchstone for what I will say. Verse ten says that *when love's perfection arrives, the partial will fade away*. I like that verse – *when love's perfection arrives, the partial will fade away*. What that means, I believe, is that we are living with a lot of the partial in this life. We are living in a kind of shadow world, a shadow world that is a very, very dim version of the reality that God intended for creation. This world is not yet where God wants or intends for it to be. What we see is just a little bit, just a portion, of what God desires. When we experience the greatest joys and beauties in life, we are experiencing moments that give us an inkling, a glimpse, into what will one day be. You know what kind of experiences I mean. I'm speaking of those transcendent moments in life, when we feel lifted above and beyond the cares and the struggles in life, the moments when we feel the fullness of love and blessing in our lives, and the moment when the powerful movement of God washes over us. Those moments can be few and far between, and too fleeting when they come, but they are powerful moments, and they are moments that put us in touch with a greater experience of God and the presence and the love of God.

I also like the final sentence in this passage, and I want to read it again and offer a few thoughts about that verse before moving on. The last sentence of that passage says, *so above all else, let love be the beautiful prize for which you run*. That's an interesting way to portray love, isn't it, as though it is somewhat elusive, something that must be pursued and in some ways, certainly, it is. Love does not always come naturally to us, because at times, self-interest takes over, so pursuing love has to be a very conscious effort, and a conscious effort that is ever on our mind. In my younger years I used to run a lot. Now I walk mostly, with just a bit of running, because running for so many years did a bit of damage to my joints. My joints ache, I have a torn meniscus in my right knee, my other knee often hurts, my feet hurt, but the good news is that it's not from age; it's just the wear and tear of all those years of running (at least that's what I tell myself). One of the things I did to keep me motivated to run each day was to run in races – 5K and 10K races. Those races were great motivation to run every day because I didn't want to be unprepared for a race. And what I liked about running in those races, aside from keeping in shape, was that they had a very simple goal – get to the finish line as quickly as possible. I do so much better when I have a very clearly stated goal, such as getting across the finish line as quickly as possible.

To expand on the analogy of running, here are a couple of things to remember. The first is a question – *what is the prize for which you are running in life?* Running can mean you are running *from* something as well as *to* something, but there is a difference in those two perspectives. Running *from* something, it seems to me, is more fear based, but running *to* something is the pursuing of something good, and hopeful, and this passage is very much one of hope. We can run *from* our problems and worries or we can run *to* the goal of a life that is rooted in love and not fear. The prize to which we are running, then, ought to be that of love. Second, running reminds me of the importance and the need for being with others. I often ran with a friend, and it was very helpful for me to do so. When I did not feel very motivated, my friend helped to motivate me. My friend pushed me and challenged me when I needed to be pushed and challenged, so I don't know how well I would have done if I had been entirely on my own. We do better when we are with others, don't we? That's why I believe attending worship is so helpful and so important, because when we gather here together we find strength, comfort, and encouragement as one body.

This passage is also, I would say, a passage of prophecy, specifically, a prophecy of hope. I don't imagine many people think of this passage as a prophecy, but it is. It is a prophecy because it gives us that glimpse into what life will be like when the will of God comes completely into being. We're certainly not there yet, are we? It is easy to be impatient waiting for that to come, and odds are we will not see it come in its completion, but one day it will come to pass. Paul is writing about the reality that all the things that are antithetical to love will one day pass away, and while we are living in times of difficulty and times of challenge, these words are a promise – they are a promise that things will one day be different.

So now I want to turn our attention to what fades away, or passes away. What fades away, what passes away, are the things that keep us from experiencing love in its fullest capacity. So let's think for the rest of our time this morning about what will pass away. Some things need to pass away. Some things are way overdue in their need to pass away. The good news is – the days are numbered for those things that must pass away! Here are some of the things that need to pass away, and one day will pass away.

*Fear, worry, and anxiety will pass away.*

The call to worship for this morning (Matthew 6:25-34, from *The Message* – *If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds. Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them. If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes*) is about worry and anxiety, but in a different translation than we are used to hearing, and it's a passage

from which I have preached on more than one occasion. I understand that fear, worry, and anxiety will never completely fade from our lives, but they do not have to hold us captive. It's amazing how some things, at the time, can seem so huge and so ominous. Years ago, when I was an associate minister, I was asked to lead a youth church softball league. I was the new guy in town so I imagine I was an easy mark to draft for such a task. A group of about a half dozen people came to see me one day and asked if I would take on the task and I agreed, even though I knew nothing about organizing or running a softball league. The final words of the group, as they left my office, were, *if you need any help, any help at all, don't hesitate to let us know*. That was the last I ever saw any of those people. I never saw them or heard from them again. I'm certain they changed their phone numbers and their addresses. In fact, I think they all went into the witness protection plan! I was in the church office the evening before the first game, trying to complete the schedule and other matters, and I was so stressed out that I thought my head was going to explode. The next day, at the first game, everything was a mess. The schedule had conflicts, there were many matters I did not have covered, people were upset, and I was ready to leave town. In retrospect, what is interesting is that I had forgotten all about the stress and anxiety of that moment until a few days ago, as I was working on this message. What seemed like such a huge deal at the time, it turns out, really did not matter, certainly not in the grand scheme of things. Why did I worry so much about something so inconsequential in life? I like to turn things around, from bad to good, so I believe we can learn from such moments, so here is what I believe we can learn from those moments of stress and anxiety. Those moments can help to prepare us for the much greater difficulties of life, those things that really do matter and that inevitably come our way. Those moments helped me when I was faced with much great difficulties, especially early in ministry, when I needed to learn how to deal with crisis situations, such as the time I was called to the scene of an accident where a young boy had been hit by a car. I arrived at the scene to find a very difficult situation. His injuries were very serious, his grandfather was on the ground crying and begging God to save him, and I was asked to go and tell his mother what had happened, and then to take her to the hospital. Thankfully, he recovered and did very well, but I don't know how I would have handled that situation if not for what I had learned from other moments of stress and anxiety. Such moments also prepared me for the times sitting at the bedsides of people as they departed from this world, to hold their hand and think about how much we would miss them, but to hold to the hope that we would once again be together, as Paul says in verse 12, *one day we will see face to face*.

*Hatred will pass away.*

Hatred is all around us and has been with us from the beginning. It's relatively easy for humanity to make progress scientifically and technologically. We are constantly making better cell phones, faster and faster computers, and making advancements in so many other ways, but when it comes to learning how to love and rejecting hate, we have as far to go as ever. The knowledge of humanity grows but the nature of humanity continues to struggle with the scourge of hatred.

When I was young, our family farm had a large field that stretched from the front of our house to the road. In the spring it was a carpet of dandelions. I don't know how many seeds there are in a single dandelion, but I know that one dandelion will produce scores of dandelions. In fact, one dandelion can produce enough dandelions to cover a field of several acres because those seeds produce many more dandelions that in turn produce many more. That is a good example of how hatred – or love – can grow. One action, one word, however small they may seem to be, is a seed that is planted in the soil of the human heart. That action, that word, will in turn, plant other seeds of either love or hatred. Verse 8 says *love never stops loving*. No matter what. *Love never stops loving* when harsh and ugly and dehumanizing words are hurled at others simply because they are different in some way from the one with hatred in their heart. *Love never stops loving*, even when hatred bursts into a grocery store or a

school or a place of worship and takes lives. *Love never stops loving* even when the bomb of a terrorist takes lives. In verse 7 Paul writes that *love is a safe place of shelter, for it never stops believing the best for others. Love never takes failure as defeat, for it never gives up.* We all need a safe shelter from the hatred in this world, and what a beautiful hope that one day we will indeed find it. We used to think of churches as safe places. We worship in sanctuaries, a word that means a safe place and a place of shelter, but that is no longer true, sadly. Schools used to be places of safety but no longer are. In spite of this tragic reality we must continue to believe and to proclaim and to work for the truth that love will win over hatred and that hatred will one day pass away.

*Disease, suffering, and even death will one day pass away.*

I am now early in my 10<sup>th</sup> year here at First Christian, and I don't believe I have ever seen a time when as many people from our congregation have struggled with health challenges and with difficult medical diagnoses. Not a week that goes by that I don't get at least one phone call from someone with a really big challenge. Increasingly, it seems to be every day that I receive a phone call about those challenges, and sometimes several calls in a single day. They are calls in which people share the challenges they face and ask for prayers. It seems that for every two or three steps of forward progress made by medical science, disease takes four or five steps forward. But we must remember that the promise of God is that disease will one day pass away and we will be free of the suffering that has so long plagued us.

And we look around the world and there is so much suffering. So much. Even in our own small community. We serve lunch at God's Kitchen, for those who need a daily meal. Next week we will travel to the Diersen Center, to lead worship and to visit with the residents there. When we visit with the women there we listen to them talk about their children from whom they are separated, and it is so heartbreaking. Every week we have volunteers at the Serenity Center helping to pass out food to literally hundreds of people. And beyond all this there is so much suffering that we don't see, but the promise of Scripture is that one day all of this will be overcome, and all of this will pass away.

And there is that great challenge, finally, that life is so temporary and will one day end. On Friday evening I attended a gathering with Tanya and her coworkers. Every fall they have a bonfire and time of fellowship and I go with her and I enjoy getting to know her coworkers. In past years, when the company was smaller, I knew all of her coworkers but this year there were a lot of new people there and most of them I didn't know. About halfway through the evening, a disturbing realization hit me. It was mind blowing to me and it was this – I was the oldest person there. Tanya likes to hire young people and her office is populated mostly with people in their 20s and 30s, but it was still a jolt to be in the unfamiliar position of being the oldest person in attendance at a gathering. I was tempted to ask the few people there who looked to be similar in age to me *how old are you? Please tell me you are older than me!* I couldn't help but wonder, *how did I so suddenly and so swiftly arrive at this point in life? Where did the time go?* It seemed such a short time ago that I was one of those young people and most everyone was older than me, and now there I was, the oldest person present. Life is so brief. Life passes by so quickly. Our sojourn in this life is but a moment.

Early in my previous ministry one of the members of the church told me, *you know Dave, if you stay here very long you are going to have a lot of difficult funerals to do.* And he was right. It was a small congregation and a small community, and I got to know those people like family and they became an important part of my life and I did indeed, over the course of my more than eighteen years of ministry there, have many, many difficult funerals, including the person who said those words to me. I've spent a lot of time with people as they take their last breath, and it becomes overwhelming. I've officiated at hundreds of funerals, and I have many more to go, and that is overwhelming when I think about it. Please understand that I don't mean to be morbid, because that is not my intent. It's hard for me to

imagine, though, if this were all there is. I would be so discouraged and so in despair if I thought that life was passing by so quickly and that at the end of life there was nothing else. Can you imagine, if we had nothing but several decades and then nothingness? But I know there is more, and you do too. The great, prophetic words of Scripture promise us that there is more. While anxiety, worry, fear, hatred, disease, and struggle will all pass away, so will death. As Christ was triumphant over death some day we will be as well. In the passing away comes something new. As the book of Revelation promises us *God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away* (Revelation 21:4). While so much passes away, the great gift of life continues. The gift of life, created in love and empowered in love, continues because of love, the great love of God!