

**“Love on a Much Larger Canvas”**  
**1 Corinthians 13:1–13**  
**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**  
**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
**January 30, 2022**

Not long after 9/11, while waiting for his plane to start boarding, a minister noticed people hurrying off a plane that was already boarding. He wondered why. So, he walked over to that gate cautiously and noticed that a man was standing there with a Bible in his hands, reading the words of Psalm 23. He was trying to offer comfort and assurance at a time when people’s anxieties were heightened. But rather than hearing the psalm’s words of assurance about God’s providential care, the people associated it with funerals and thus death. As a result, the gesture had an effect directly opposite to what the man intended.

It is odd, though I suppose understandable, how we associate certain texts which include broad trajectories of meaning and application with only one context. Psalm 23 is a text we hear often at funerals, appropriately so, thus we associate it with death. Yet, there are so many other life experiences this psalm speaks to as it describes God as a Good Shepherd and an Ideal Host. We should not limit this psalm’s voice in addressing other parts of life that benefit from God’s care.

Another text we limit in this way is the familiar reading from 1 Corinthians 13. We think of it as a wedding text because it is read so often at weddings, and as Psalm 23 is a wonderful resource in times of grief, 1 Corinthians 13 is a boundless treasure for marriage. But this text does not focus on marriage. It is written by the Apostle Paul, and as we recall, Paul is not very keen on marriage. In this same letter, he counsels the unmarried not to marry unless they have to so as not to be aflame with passion (1 Corinthians 7:8-9). Scholars suggest that this view is a consequence of Paul’s belief that Jesus will return any moment. If the world as we know it is about to end, it’s probably not a great time to start a family. But we don’t really know why Paul has this view.

We only know that he does and that he is not talking about marriage in our text. He is talking about love on a much larger canvas that includes the

intimacy of two life partners but extends to all relationships, all of life, including the life of the church. Faith, hope and love abide, these three, says Paul; and the greatest of these is love. That is big claim, a big message on a big canvas, and it squares with the whole of scripture and everything we know about the ministry of Jesus.

So, one message of this familiar text is about the centrality of love, its significance, its priority over all other things. Just before this eloquent discourse on love, Paul has been talking about gifts the Spirit has given the church and how they all have value. Part of the motivation for this sustained argument is the Corinthians' belief that some gifts are more important than others. In particular, they seem to think that people who can speak in tongues are the closest to God.

Paul disputes this claim, talking about the need for diverse gifts, and in the chapter following the discourse on love, he will return to the theme of multiple gifts. But at the end of chapter 12, after his extended description of gifts, using the metaphor of the body, he says this — and I will show you a still more excellent way. He is talking about the way of love, the one thing that is more important than anything else.

Being able to speak in the tongues of mortals or angels will amount to nothing if he doesn't have love, he'll be like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Having prophetic powers and the ability to understand great mysteries amounts to nothing without love, as does giving everything away to help others. Without love, nothing else matters — teaching, preaching, visiting, feeding the hungry or clothing the needy, even going on a mission trip. If we are not filled with love, motivated by love, seeking to share love, it won't matter. Faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

“What else would it be?” we might say. Well, many proceed as if correct beliefs are what matter most. If we don't sign on the dotted line to all of their theological propositions, we aren't even counted among the faithful. This was the story of the Southern Baptist Convention and why we left it, along with ego and power issues. There wasn't much love involved in the firing of professors and missionaries, but there was a lot of talk about correct belief which the takeover crowd equated with faith.

For others it's about taking the right prophetic stances and actions. It's not enough to agree that there is a need or problem. We have to respond to it in a specific way, their way, or else we don't really care. For some people it's missions in general, as they define missions. For others, it's standing up for justice at the time and place they choose. There is a lot of passion involved, a lot of nobility, just not much love.

It was said of an older woman in another setting that she had a lot of fire, but not much warmth. We know what this means and how ironic it is because justice is simply love on a social and systemic scale. How can we extend love to the masses when we don't extend it to the person in front of us? As a character in the musical "Hair" puts it:

How can people be so heartless?  
How can people be so cruel?  
Especially people who care about strangers  
Who care about evil and social injustice  
Do you only care about the bleeding crowd?  
How about a needing friend?  
I need a friend

Without warmth, fire is useless. We can't care about bleeding crowds and not care about friends. Without love, nothing else matters.

But what exactly are we talking about when we use the word "love"? It is one of the most overused and misunderstood words in the English language to the point that it has almost lost all meaning. Aldous Huxley put it this way (*Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow, and Other Essays*, 1956, p. 68).

Of all the worn, smudged, dog's-eared words in our vocabulary, 'love' is surely the grubbiest, smelliest, slimiest. Bawled from a million pulpits, lasciviously crooned through hundreds of millions of loud speakers, it has become an outrage to good taste and decent feeling, an obscenity which one hesitates to pronounce. And yet, it has to be pronounced, for, after all, *Love* is the last word.

If we are to recover the value of the word, not to mention love itself, we need to be clear about what it means. Our reading from 1 Corinthians is helpful at this point because Paul talks not only about the centrality of love but its nature too. “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude;” Paul says, “It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrong-doing, but rejoices in the truth.”

There are a number of conclusions we might draw from these verses, but the primary insight is that love is about acting in the best interest of others. Love is not limited to benevolent thoughts and warm feelings — these can enhance our capacity to love at times while getting in the way at others. “Tough love” — for example, helping someone we care about with an addiction — does not stir up warm and fuzzy feelings, but it is love. This is the kind of love Paul is talking about, active love, the kind of love Jesus extends to others.

Jesus heals a man with a withered hand, he embraces children others rebuke and makes them feel welcome in his presence, he forgives a woman caught in adultery, knowing the man equally guilty has not been held accountable. But he also speaks words of rebuke to Peter when he refuses to accept the possibility that Jesus will suffer and die. He confronts the woman at the well about her needs for healing and truth. He is honest with the rich young ruler about his need to do something about the disparity between his material wealth and his spiritual poverty. All of these things Jesus does in love, in the interest of helping others, no matter how they make him and others feel.

Such is our calling to love. Love is ever looking to and acting in the best interest of others, no matter how it makes us feel. It’s about a parent saying no to something, even though the child doesn’t like it. It’s about providing clothing for people in need whether they thank us or not and helping hungry people to have food whether we get to be with them when they eat or not. It’s about something as simple yet strangely controversial in this time as getting fully vaccinated, included getting boosted, and wearing a mask. What could be more helpful for others than these things? Love is about helping others in practical ways.

So, Paul says love is more important than anything else, and he says it is about acting in the best interest of others, not simply thinking or feeling well of them. Then, he says that love never gives up on the other but ever extends concern to all no matter what the cost. Paul says love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. That's a word that applies to marriage, but it also applies to every relationship we have as we follow the one who loves all people without counting the cost.

Consider the reading from Luke 4. Jesus informs the hometown congregation that Isaiah's prophecy of one anointed to preach good news to the poor and deliver the captives is fulfilled in him. Fondness quickly turns to hatred and Jesus is run out of town. In fact, he is nearly killed. Why? In part, because a prophet struggles to find acceptance in his own hometown and he has claimed a high calling for himself among people who were around when he was having his diapers changed.

But there is something else here. Jesus makes two references to God's concern — Elijah's ministry to the widow at Zarephath and Elisha's healing of Naaman. What do these stories have in common and why would they anger people? Both point to God's concern for outsiders. Jesus is saying that God's concern is not limited to any one group of people. God has not given up on anyone. Nor will Jesus. He will not cross anyone off his list of concern. The folks in his hometown have crossed off some folks, as have we — some individuals and some groups of people — and yet, as we pay attention to Paul's words and Jesus' actions, we realize that giving up on people is not an option.

The movie *Seabiscuit* tells the story of a horse others had given up on because he was too small, ridden by a jockey whose anger made him nothing but trouble, trained by a man who lived in the bushes with a horse others had wanted to "put down", and bought by an owner who lost a child and a marriage and nearly his life. The whole movie is about second chances and never giving up, as revealed in a line the trainer delivers as he explains why he has spent time with a wounded horse — you don't throw away a whole life just because it has a problem.

Such is God's concern for us and all people, and such is our calling to love. There is nothing more important than love, and what it involves is acting in others' best interests and never giving up on anyone.