

Mark W. Hanna
Roland Park Presbyterian Church
Trinity Sunday (Year A-08)

Psalm 8
I Corinthians 13

“Love Overflowing”

“The first stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love. The middle stage is to believe that there are many kinds of love and that the Greeks had a word for each of them. The last stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love.”¹

This is one pastor’s interpretation of I Corinthians 13. I am sure most, if not all of us, have heard a sermon preached on Paul’s exposition on love before, whether in a regular Sunday morning service or at a wedding. The preacher probably explained to you that the Greek language, in which this passage was written, has no less than three words for love (the passionate *eros*, the sympathetic *philia*, and undeserved and unreserved *agape*) and that in this passage Paul uses the third, the one most often associate with God’s love. For this reason pastors sometimes think it is a mistake to read this passage at weddings, since Paul is definitely referring to something much greater than the romantic love shared between two people. Yet, isn’t it the hope and goal of every marriage, union and relationship to evolve into more and be grounded in something greater? I always advise couples who ask me to preside over their wedding ceremony that if their partnership is to last they must be willing to transform the feelings they have for one another on their wedding day into a commitment and devotion that will survive even when (especially when!) that feeling is not available.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 241.

But that is not to say that the pastoral instinct against using this passage as a comment on romantic love is not without merit. There is a larger application here: that of the Christian way of life. First we must note that Paul assumes that the Christian way of life is lived out in community. He is not addressing individuals adhering to some system of belief. He is talking to a group of first century Jews who desire to be caught up in the way Jesus revealed, a way of living life in connection to God and others. Yet, they seem to be finding it more difficult than they had initially anticipated and so he is addressing the hardships of being community together. You'll notice that this love Paul is talking about has nothing to do with how the Corinthians feel about one another. Earlier in the letter we learn that there are factions and divisions in the Corinthian community. Paul's counsel to them is the reminder that, "You don't have to like one another to love one another." That is because Paul's exposition on love defines it in terms of action, not feelings. Listen again to his description: *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

One theologian observes that "in the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling...On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being

willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end.”²

According to our church calendars today is Trinity Sunday. I often joke that the doctrine of the trinity is good theology, but bad math. Only theologians would think $1+1+1=1$. Yet, if we allow ourselves to understand it not as mathematical certainty, but an attempt to put into words something that is beyond our ability to do so, we can appreciate it for an expression of the mystery of God that gives us the theological ground to talk about the community of faith as an expression of this agape love we receive from God. Because we receive this love, we can also love one another, not because of similarities, or affinities or agreement, but because we know ourselves to be grounded in something larger than ourselves, something that connects us to one another and to God. As one theologian puts it, “the much-maligned doctrine of the Trinity is an assertion that, all other appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, there is only one God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery. Thus the Trinity is a way of saying something about us and the way we experience God. [It] is also a way of saying something about [the inner life of God], [that] within [God’s own self] love happens. In other words, [God’s love] is not a noun, but a verb [which] is reflexive as well as transitive.”³

Remember: “The first stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love. The middle stage is to believe that there are many kinds of love and that the Greeks had

² Ibid., 242.

³ Ibid., 159.

a word for each of them. The last stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love.”⁴ I Corinthians 13 and the proclamation that God is three in one have this in common: they are both summaries of the Gospel that insist that all despite all appearances to the contrary, and despite the failures of our language to capture the mystery of God, there is only one love; that as odd as it sounds to say, the passionate embrace of two lovers and that of a mother cradling her new born child is not as dissimilar as we might first suppose because they spring for the same source; that the affection we feel for our loved ones that displays itself in willful acts of kindness and the sense of obligation we sometimes feel to those in need that produces reluctant acts of charity are really just two parts of the same whole; that hard as it is to believe all love is grounded in God’s love which overflows from God’s own self unto us and our world.

Whenever we receive a child to be baptized this is the radical hope and faith that we proclaim; that somehow, by some mystery of God, this child will grow to know God’s love through the love of family, friends and the community of faith, through our successful attempts to communicate this good news as well as our failed ones. That is why the child’s parents and those who know the child stand together with those who, for all intents and purposes, are strangers and may have little or no interaction with the one being baptized and yet we all take the same pledge together: to raise the child in the knowledge of God’s overflowing love. For it is in this way we play witness to the faith that our love as Christians is more than our natural affection for one another, but is grounded in nothing less than God’s

⁴ Ibid., 241.

amazing, undeserved and unreserved love. And in this way we also play witness to that which was made known to us in and through Jesus: that God's love is not some abstract ideal, but can be revealed through us when we follow in the Christ's example and are willing to work for the well being of others and all of creation and as we recognize each and every person for what we truly are: expressions of the love overflowing from the very heart of God!

Let us pray: *Thank you God, for the promise we are about to claim and celebrate for Andrew, the promise that you are the source of love and that your love is poured out undeservedly and unreservedly on us and the whole world. Each time we celebrate this sacrament may we renew our own commitment to act with love toward all people and all creation; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*