

Sacred Texts for Beloved Community 4 *The Hard Work of Love*

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From the Pulpit of
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1 Corinthians 13

¹ If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will

come to an end. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 12:1-13

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I cannot count the times I have read First Corinthians 13 at weddings. Wedding vows to love “in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live,” can take flight on the wings of – *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*. I also cherish reading these words at Memorial Services, standing before a family in deep grief for someone loved dearly, describing the mystery of resurrection through Paul’s proclamation: *Love never ends*.

However, it is worth reminding ourselves – from time to time - that Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth was neither a wedding homily nor a funeral meditation. Paul’s words are addressed to the church. And not to an idyllic, harmonious vision of an ideal church. Rather the church as it is, a widely diverse community of people, who sometimes appear to barely tolerate each other; whose differences and disagreements are often more striking than their unity and peace.

We know from both of Paul’s Letters to the Corinthian church, that these early Christians were often at each other’s throats. There were deep divisions. They had leadership rivalries and class distinctions. Paul had to correct their Lord’s Supper practice because the rich were eating and drinking too much before the day laborers arrived to find the communion

bread and wine were gone! They fought about whether they could eat meat that was offered to idols; whether being single or married mattered for church leadership. They argued: Is the resurrection a bodily or a spiritual reality? And, as we have heard this morning they debated their spiritual gifts and how each member might be ranked in importance. Paul is trying to help these contentious believers – despite their differences – be united in the work of Christ for the sake of their witness in the world.

Typically, we read this letter only in parts, and fail to hear how chapters 12 and 13 go together. “You are the body of Christ,” Paul says to people who were arguing about all kinds of matters related to what they believed and how they would do the work of Christ in the world. Then, to help them understand that their diversity is essential to their unified mission, Paul writes to them about love. Love in community is complex and hard work. Faith, hope, love abide – these three, but the greatest of these is love, are words meant to hold a fractured church together.

Concerned by how we have so domesticated these words about love, one New Testament scholar says that First Corinthians 13 needs to be, and I quote: “Rescued from the quagmire of romantic sentimentality in which popular piety has embedded it... For they are not about romance, sentiment, or how to behave with people who like us. They are about an

otherwise outrageous way to respond to those who do not like us.”¹
Spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ across a wide range of humanity, Paul reminds us that we in the church need one another, and the lifeblood connecting this interdependent, diverse body of believers is hard-working, sacrificial love.

Now, we do not spend a lot of time at Bryn Mawr arguing over whether the meat at Wednesday night supper was first a burnt offering to someone else’s God. However, the deep divisions within our culture come inside the church whenever people walk in, political divisiveness as well as differing perspectives on various culture wars. The polarization of today’s political alignments, about social justice, regarding gender issues and inclusion; about immigration and medical science, all these and more, come into congregational life whenever the church opens its doors.

Of course, across the spectrum of American Christianity you can find a church with more like-minded people, leaning to the left or right. And, you can abandon gathering in person, for incarnate community, and stay home with like-minded people online where social media is fostering superficial relationships, increasing isolation and anxiety, and enabling violence and bullying by displacing genuine human interaction with

¹ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation Commentaries.

curated, algorithmic content. The issues that divide us have changed since Paul's day, but his appeal to come together as the body of Christ, in person, is as critical as ever, if we are going to be his faithful disciples.

This does not mean that anything goes or we simply try to get along, no matter how outrageous and horrible some worldviews and behaviors have become. God gives us the gift of discernment to be used for the common good. As heirs to the Protestant Reformation, Presbyterians do this by putting Holy Scripture in the middle of our worship, and the sovereignty of God over all creation at the center of life and faith. We cling to the memory that when God called Abraham and Sarah and promised that through them all the families of the earth would be blessed – we have a mission to be instruments of God's blessing for all people. We remember that when God sent Moses into the court of Pharaoh to plead on behalf of the enslaved Israelites, saying, "Let my people go," the collective liberation of oppressed people became the mission of God's people. We affirm the content of Jesus inaugural sermon which set in motion the mission of the church. Preaching from Isaiah, you remember what he said: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.*

Further, Jesus reduced six-hundred-thirteen commandments to two

imperatives: Love God with heart, soul, mind and strength and love neighbor as yourself. And when asked what he meant by *neighbor*, Jesus told the evocative story of the Good Samaritan to help us recognize our neighbor AS anyone who needs help getting out of the ditch. Jesus calls us to care about matters of human welfare, which has to be done within the political spheres of our day. That's what the word *politics* means, affairs of the polis - Greek for city or city-state.

So, for Christians, for Presbyterians, the hard part is that we do not all agree on how to approach matters of human welfare from a political perspective. As Columbia Seminary's Professor of Christian Ethics, Mark Douglas, has noted: we used to describe Mainline Christian churches as purple, a mix of red and blue political perspectives, worshipping and working together. Today, he says, we are more like a pointillist painting, with distinct dots of blue and red that don't really mix together anymore. He says, "They're splotches of red and blue that can be in the same space only so long as they do not talk about politics." If that sounds pessimistic, Mark adds this as a worthy challenge for the church: "We should recognize that the mainline church is one of the few places left in American society where people will gather across political differences, see

those with whom they disagree, and call them *brother* and *sister*.”²

I hope and pray that this congregation will continue to thrive in our polarized political environment, but know that it requires hard-working love. I hope and pray that you continue coming together, even increase your coming together, to talk to one another about how to be faithful to the gospel in this season of deep divisions. This is happening in pockets of involvement here at Bryn Mawr, but in a large church you can find like-minded friends in various groups and never engage those with whom you disagree.

Now, the preacher gets plenty of disagreement! I have been humbled by how attentive you have been to my preaching, but in these last years, by a few I have also simultaneously been critiqued for being way too political in the pulpit, *and* not nearly political enough. Frankly, with tongue in cheek, I take some pride in the fact that I have a folder of feedback that proves my preaching has irritated both the left and the right in equal measure. But this issue is not about me; it’s not just about preaching or even program. It’s about how a congregation like this one, in this season of horrific polarization and blaming and name-calling, can make room for diversity as together we follow Jesus into a world of need

² Richard DuBose, President of Montreat Conference Center quoting Mark Douglas in “Are there Boundaries for Politics in the Pulpit,” This Week in Montreat, 7/4/25.

among competing and divisive spheres of political engagement.

The church of Christ has to come together, engage with and support one another, sometimes agree to disagree, and ultimately embody the ministry to which we are called. We cannot be all things to all people, because we have a biblical mandate to love, to show forth a love that is patient and kind, not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude; a love that does not insist on its own way; is not irritable; that keeps no record of wrongs but rejoices in the truth.

I love the way Anne Lamott describes her little Presbyterian congregation in Marin City, California, as a patchwork of humanity. Sitting in the pews you'll find a retired professor with a couple of books under his arm, a single mom trying to keep her kids entertained during the sermon, a man who sleeps on the church steps during the week, and a woman who commutes from one of the wealthiest zip codes in America. Add to that a handful of recovering addicts, people with mental illness, and more than a few with very strong political opinions. "On paper," Lamott writes, "none of us belongs together. And yet, on Sunday mornings, there they are. They pass the peace like it actually matters. They pray for each other, even when they don't always like each other. And somehow, by the end of worship, they have become more than the sum of their parts..."

She says, “this is the real miracle: not that people who look the same or think the same gather together, but that people who are radically different - politically, economically, socially - learn to belong to each other.” The body of Christ, she reminds us, was never meant to be a club of like-minded folks. “It was meant to be a living community stitched together by love -- a ragtag, grace-soaked family that should not work, but somehow, by the mercy of God, it does.”³

In community this kind of love is hard work. But the church of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the world, depends upon us to do it.

AMEN.

³ Anne Lamotte, *Traveling Mercies*.