

May 5th: Know

As many of you know, this Fall we returned to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” In each of these passages, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative, that I want us to be paying attention to and practicing this week. Of course, we know that love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, I want to remind us that the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. The goal is to increase our love in action, this week and every week, so that our world can more and reflect God’s enduring love for all of creation. So I invite you to join me as we pursue love in action together.

Before we jump in, let’s pray.

God of Love, we come to this sacred space to hear the familiar story, we need to be reminded that you love us deeply and are with us in our human lives. Sometimes this good news is drowned out by other voices in our culture, or other people who do not speak with compassion, but when we are in your presence, we are at peace once more. Today we commit this time together to receiving your love so that we can go out and share it with others. Fill us with your enduring care, so that it might overflow out of us and into our community. Amen.

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the sight of God...

I’m just kidding! Just wanted to see if you were paying attention...

But be honest—that's what you think of when you hear this passage, right? How many times have you heard this text from 1 Corinthians outside of a wedding ceremony? Probably not very many times, right?

I'm in my prime wedding guest years, and I have heard this particular piece of scripture more times than I can count in the past decade. Almost all of my friends are married now, and for a while, their ceremonies were the only time I ever heard this message from Paul preached on or talked about.

But, if you look more closely at Paul's writings, you might be surprised to learn that Paul didn't exactly have marriage in mind when he wrote these verses. Like me, Paul was single, and he probably wasn't in a position to be giving out a lot of wedding advice.

So as we take a closer look at this famous passage about love, we might need to reimagine Paul's context and reconsider the purpose of this text. Let's begin with a little background.

At this point in the first century, the apostle Paul had been traveling the Mediterranean for a few decades, and these travels had included stopping into many Greek and Roman cities to plant and nurture communities where people were seeking to follow Jesus. It was a mix of Jews and Gentiles, and these early communities sometimes struggled to overcome the cultural and spiritual differences that arose between them.

Paul arrived in Corinth after his visit to Athens, and he spends a significant amount of time in this city. Corinth was a port city, known as a melting pot, where people of all ethnicities, traditions, backgrounds, and cultures mingled. People from all over the Mediterranean came to this region, they came to trade, to engage in the worship of Roman gods, to attend lectures at the universities, and to socialize with other like minded citizens. But still, people still divided themselves up—they were divided by industry, political loyalties, philosophical ideologies, social class, and preferred deities. These divisions created a fractured society, and this had an effect on all groups, including the

community that Paul is attempting to create here. So Paul begins a series of correspondence with this community, hoping to intervene before the situation gets out of hand.

In the passage that was read last week, we hear that the infant church at Corinth is a bit of a hot mess. Like their culture, they are a group of fractured human beings, broken apart by ideas, preferences, and visions for the future. They are a community divided—split into factions, with differing loyalties and differing opinions. And so in many of the early chapters of this letter to the Corinthians, Paul calls out the divisive behavior and advises this church to find ways to be unified in their diversity. He implores them to remind themselves of what brings them together, and instructs them to remember the baptism that has brought them into relationship with God and with each other. He tells them to value each other's gifts, and to cultivate a sense of gratitude for the unique skill sets that other members have to offer.

As this letter comes to a close, Paul gives them some final pieces of wisdom—he tells this struggling community that there is only one true solution to this problem of division, and that solution is love. I know that this might sound cliché, or like a platitude that we use like a bandaid on complex problems, but it's true. I know a lot of our world today revolves around cynicism and it has become popular to dismiss love as an overly saccharine idea, but I think this underestimates the power of the kind of love that Paul is talking about. Paul wants his audience, and by extension us, to know that this particular kind of love is the antidote to our human condition of brokenness and fracture. Love is the cure for our desire to break apart and exclude. Love is the glue that holds us together.

So in this section of the letter, now sometimes known as “the love chapter,” Paul spells out three specific things: number one, how important love is to being the people of God, number two, how God defines love, and number three, how we are supposed to love each other.

First, when Paul is thinking about love, he's clear that it isn't a secondary characteristic or lesser aspect of following Jesus—love is front and center. Love is the starting point for anyone who desires to live like Jesus. Love is at the very core of who we are and what our message is all about. He even goes so far as to say that without love, everything else about faith and ministry and church is meaningless. Yes, meaningless.

The passage opens with these three statements: “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

See? Paul says without love, there is nothing. Without love, we have nothing. Without love, the church would cease to exist. Without love, the people of God are just adding to the noise in our world.

Paul then goes on to share God's definition of love, he writes, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

In these verses, Paul is clear that love isn't a feeling, or an emotion, or a swirl of hormones—it's much more concrete than that. Instead of understanding love as something that we feel in a particular moment, Paul seems to say that the true definition of this love is something that we do—this type of love is defined by specific actions and behaviors that we carry out on a consistent basis. It's not abstract, or hypothetical, but grounded in specific ways of being in the world—deeds that we can choose to live into each day.

In this definition, Paul says: this is what love looks like. This is how love acts. This is what love does.

So that brings us to Paul's final point: how to love each other.

In this final section of this chapter, Paul goes on a bit of a tangent. In verse 9, he begins, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

What I think these verses are trying to convey is that for all of us, love isn't something that just happens or something that appears out of nowhere. Love is cultivated, love is a discipline that we engage in, love is grown just like we grow from children to adults. Love isn't static, but something that should increase as we learn and participate in it.

Paul seems to be saying that the kind of love that heals broken communities is a love that is continually worked on, it is a common effort that everyone is invited to be a part of. It is our mutual purpose, our uniting task. When we all labor to love each other in the way that God intended, not only will the community grow and flourish, but the love of that community will grow and flourish as well.

But as I thought about this passage this week, what most struck me about this final piece of advice is that Paul seems to draw a parallel between the act of loving, and the act of knowing. In his mind, increasing in love and increasing in knowledge are related to each other in an important way that should inform our own behavior.

I think Paul would agree that simply knowing someone is not the same as loving them, but I think he would be the first to assert that we cannot truly love each other without being committed to deeply knowing each other.

Let me say that again: we can't love each other without being committed to deeply knowing each other.

Love that isn't based in understanding is love that is doomed to be superficial. Love that isn't grounded in true relationship is love that will end up feeling artificial and insufficient. The kind of love that Paul is talking about requires that we are open to knowing each other and being known by one another.

As a community of faith operating in a broken and hurting world, I think this passage could not come at a better time. I think many of us are looking around at our families, our cities, our nation, and are seeing the effects of division everywhere. Like the city of Corinth, our culture is a bit of a hot mess, am I right? Even small disagreements or petty conflicts are leading to fracturing relationships, and I don't think any of us are immune to the consequences. Every single one of us can probably think of an example in our own lives where we are encountering this ongoing brokenness, or name a moment when this kind of segmentation has driven us apart from someone we know or love.

So here's what I think we should do about it, both as individuals, and as a congregation.

Number one: Prioritize love whenever and wherever we can.

If Paul says that nothing is more important than love, then let's make sure we believe that too. If love is the reason that the church exists, then let's do our part to make sure that our community knows that love is our highest value.

Number two: Hold ourselves accountable to the definition of love that Paul has taught us.

If Paul says that love looks a certain way and acts a certain way, then let's make sure that our behavior aligns with those standards. Take some time to reflect on your day and ask: was I patient, was I kind, did I honor others, did I

protect and trust? This is not an opportunity to judge other people, but an invitation to examine our own hearts and our own impulses.

And number three: Seek out authentic relationships and pursue vulnerability.

If Paul says that knowing and being known is central to this healing love, then we need to take seriously the call to reveal our honest selves. Consider building a new relationship by sharing some of your current struggles, or deepen an existing relationship by listening to the needs and experiences of someone else. Be real, be vulnerable, take the risk of being known, so that you can be fully loved. And in return, offer the same to others.

My friends, I'll think we'll find that with love as our highest value, a definition of love to guide us, and a commitment to vulnerability, the things that threaten to separate us will start to recede. The boundaries that we've built to keep us apart will fall away. The preferences and opinions that we've idolized and allowed to control us will lose their power. Our culture of division will cease to exist.

Why? Because the greatest of these is love.

Amen.