

I Corinthians 13:1-13     Beautiful, Broken, and Beloved  
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL  
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So, here we finally are! The call process is so long and slow that sometimes it has felt as though this day would never come. I have read about you; I have talked to as many people as I could about you; I have imagined you. Now I finally get to meet you, and you get to meet me.

As I was thinking about what to preach on today, I looked at the passages from the lectionary and wondered: should I go with the Luke passage where Jesus preaches his very first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, and the congregation tries to throw him off a cliff? Or should I go with 1 Corinthians?

So: 1 Corinthians. Before I read it, I should tell you that this passage has special resonance with me because it was the first passage I ever learned by heart. I was about eleven years old, and I was on a long car trip with my mother and my aunt and my cousin, Tim, who was the same age as me. We were driving from North Carolina to Illinois to visit family. Tim and I were in the backseat, and we started bickering from the first moment my mother turned the ignition. After a couple of hours of this, and after frequent warnings to settle down, my aunt turned around, handed each of us a Bible, and told us that we had one hour to memorize 1

Corinthians 13. I took the task seriously. For one hour, I was completely silent and focused, because I was determined that, when that hour was up, I was not going to let Tim beat me on memorization. I may have missed the point of the passage. You decide! Listen, now, for the word of God:

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1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals 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 or resentful; 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 in a mirror, dimly, 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 abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

The word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

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Even though this letter was originally written to a church in conflict, the context in which we usually hear 1 Corinthians 13 is at weddings. That feels appropriate to me today, because this feels a little like a wedding—or, more precisely, an arranged marriage, since we both said “I do” to this new relationship sight unseen. I did, at least, get to meet some members of your family—the PNC--but that’s more than you got to do with me.

So, at this point, we have seen each other’s pictures, we’ve heard all the glowing reports from people who know us, and now, we get to meet each other face-to-face and begin this new life in ministry together.

Beginning a life together, whether it is in the form of a marriage or a ministry or any serious relationship, is a little like buckling up for a long car trip. You start out with the glossy brochures from the tourism office, but eventually you have to undertake the actual journey together. Inevitably, you will hit some bumps in the road—and, this being Alabama, I’m guessing you know something about bumps in the road! Soon, the façade starts to slip, and you become aware of each other’s bad habits, bad moods, and bad sense of direction. That’s when the necessity of Paul’s words kicks in: “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.”

Those words are essential in any relationship that matters. Take parenting, for example. Years ago, when our oldest was about three, he went through a period when he was constantly wreaking havoc, constantly throwing tantrums, and most of them were directed at me. At the same time, he was an angel at church and at preschool. His teachers would gush to me about what a wonderful child he was. I wondered why I was the one who got to live with the evil twin.

I was talking about this one Sunday morning at church with the Christian Educator and another mother of a moody preschooler. The Christian Educator told me that what we were experiencing was normal. “Three is an age with a lot of emotional turbulence,” she said. “He can only hold that turbulence in for so long, while he’s at church or school; but when he gets home, he knows he’s in a safe space where he can let it go, because he knows that you’ll still love him. So really, you could see his bad behavior at home as a tribute to your relationship with him.” At which point, the other mom, piped up, “But couldn’t he just send flowers?!”

Love is baffling sometimes. It can be frustrating and exhausting. It’s hard work. So why bother?

I think part of the answer to that can be found toward the end of our passage. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly,” Paul says, “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.”

One of the things that attracted me to this place was your Vision Statement: “A Home in the Heart of the City,” with all that follows. While not every home functions this way, in our heart of hearts we know that a *true* home is where we can be fully known *and* fully loved. That place of belonging where we can let down our guard and reveal our whole self in all our beauty and all our brokenness—and still find a safe embrace. Because each of us needs a place of deep belonging. A place that can accept our worst, because it also sees and delights in our best.

That’s what love is: a deep caring for the *whole* person in all of our beautiful brokenness. The first part of our passage gives us the “how” of love—with patience and kindness, without arrogance, boastfulness or rudeness, etc. But it is this that gives us the “why”: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, 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.”

Love sees the whole person. And so, my cousin was not just the snotty kid who was getting on my every last nerve—he was also the prankster and adventurer who could always come up with a fun game to play, and who would, a few years later, give me my first ride on a motorcycle.

And our first-born, even in that difficult phase, was not just the tiny tyrant who could throw our whole household into chaos—he was also this amazing bundle of energy who would surprise me, out of the blue, with moments of unexpected sweetness; who could always make me laugh—which is the *worst* when you’re trying to be mad; and who would get just as engrossed in a story as I would, so that we could read together for hours, until Sam would finally poke his head in the door and say, “Um, shouldn’t he be getting to sleep?!”

These days it feels as though we live in a culture of “gotcha,” in which everyone is just waiting for us to make a misstep so that they can pick us apart and reject us completely; and in which we are defined by the worst of who we are and what we’ve done. Just the choice of a political party can make us a monster to somebody of a different persuasion. Tweets and Facebook posts from years ago—stupid things we posted on impulse and don’t even believe anymore, embarrassing photos from adolescence—can reemerge at any moment to destroy our lives. It’s an atmosphere in which it doesn’t feel safe to be known, and yet, living our lives in a protective shell is deeply isolating. What grace to have a place where we can let down our guard. A place where we can trust that those around us are rooting for us, even when we go wrong. It is my fervent hope that this can be that place for me, for you, and for anyone who walks through these doors. A home in the heart of the city.

The first guiding principle that you list under that Vision Statement is “Where children are cherished,” and really, none of us stops being a child. We long to cherish and be cherished. To be seen for all of who we are. And so, may this be a place in which none of us has to lie or deny any part of ourselves—whether it’s our politics or our race or our sexual orientation or our true gender identity or the state of our mental health or the state of our finances or any other factor that might cause us to be rejected somewhere else. Because that’s not what home is. Home is where we are seen face to face. It’s where we know the other fully, even as we are fully known.

And so, I look forward to being at home with you in the heart of this city, as we strive to be a doorway into the heart of God—because it is God who shows us the way home, by choosing, as Jesus, to climb in, buckle up, and undertake this journey by our side—even when we are at our wrongheaded worst.

God chooses to cherish us, not in spite of some aspect of who we are, but because of the whole of who we are—each of us God’s child: beautiful, broken, and beloved.