

Love is patient...

I'm sure for many of us, when we see the reading is from 1 Corinthians 13, and we hear "love is patient, love is kind", we think of weddings. Then we can get distracted by all the things of weddings, how beautiful the bride looks, the flowers and the catering and the cakes, how all the bridesmaids believe they'll be able to wear their dresses on another occasion, and what we can do in that strange time between the ceremony and the reception.

And in amongst all those distractions, we hear what Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about love – and about how love is the most important thing for the newly married couple.

Sometimes we think of people getting married in terms of 'do they love each other enough to get married?' as if we could go to a couple and say, 'on a score out of ten, how much do you love each other', and as long as they give a high enough answer we marry them.

I don't think I've been to a wedding where the happy couple would've rated themselves as anything less than an eleven. But the thing that people should be thinking about is not 'how much do you love each other', rather it's 'how much will you love each other'. Because in the context of marriage, love is so much more than a simple feeling. It is a commitment. A promise. And not just a promise to keep feeling a certain way – but a promise to act. To put each other first. To be with each other until you are parted by death. For better and for worse.

Love isn't simply sitting around looking glowingly at each other. Love is a call to action.

While 1 Corinthians 13 is certainly relevant to a marriage, there is more to this passage than saying that love is the most important thing – in fact, Paul's writing here doesn't address marriage specifically.

Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthian church because the Corinthian church was not living as God's people should have been living. There was conflict, there was confusion, people were misguided and misled. When we looked at Chapter 12 of this letter a couple of weeks ago, we heard about some of that conflict – where one thing in particular, was causing trouble — the gift of 'speaking in tongues' which some people thought was the sign of a faithful Christian.

In that chapter, though, Paul wrote about the variety of spiritual gifts, and how God gave us each gifts which were to be used together, as the church. Paul wrote that part of the letter because the Corinthians were abusing their spiritual gifts. Some were lording their gifts over others and making them feel bad. Paul goes on to explain how some Corinthians were trying to exercise all the spiritual gifts; even ones they clearly did not possess. That section ends with Paul saying, "you can strive for the greater gifts, but I will show you a still more excellent way."

And that's when we get to this famous passage, 1 Corinthians 13. Love is patient, love is kind.

This section about love is all about how to correctly use the gifts that God has given all of us. Love is about how to correctly use the freedom that we have as sChristian. And the love that Paul is speaking about is not the love of romance and infatuation. Paul is using the Greek word "agape" which means self-sacrificing love. Agape love is behind all actions that put others first. This is the love with which God loves us by sending his son Jesus to die in order to restore our relationship with God.

This "agape" love is the same love that motivates people to give their lives up to save others. This love is the same love that motivates people to live their lives for others. It is not only present in the warm fuzzy feelings experienced by a couple who are infatuated with each other. It is the love that allows two people to remain married for many years, long after the initial infatuation has worn off.

In recent times, I've often come back to Jesus' new commandment – "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

I'm sure we all know that – I'm sure that we can all sing the song. But can we – or do we – live that out in practice? What does it mean for us to love one another just as Jesus has first loved us? We know that Jesus died on the cross for us – can we do the same?

We're not called to do that – in fact we cannot do that – because Jesus' sacrifice was once and for all.

So, what will loving each other look like? It's all very well to know that we must love one another – but that's just theory - how do we love one another in practice?

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul tells us what loving one another in practice looks like.

Verses 1 through 3 tells us that anything we do, no matter how heroic or wonderful needs to be motivated by love. This means that we must be doing the actions for the benefit of others and not ourselves. Otherwise, Paul says it is nothing – no matter how wonderful the action or how great the gift. Speaking in tongues is as useless as a clanging cymbal, if it is not used for the benefit of others.

Similarly, if we are wise and faithful and learned, what's the point, if we are not sharing those things with others?

And if our acts of charity (giving away our possessions) and self-denial are done so that we can look good to others, then we gain nothing from them.

Everyone loves others when it feels good. When there is a benefit for us. But what about when loving someone doesn't feel good. What if God calls us share his message with people who don't want to hear? That's what Jeremiah was called to do, as we heard in our Old Testament reading. That's what Jesus himself did – over and over again.

Perhaps Paul's most famous words are 'Love is patient, love is kind'. I like to think of that statement in the context of John's first letter where John writes "... so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love." (1 John 4:16a) . God is love – so God is patient, God is kind.

And if we are truly loving, then we are patient and we are kind.

That's what Paul said to the Corinthians [if you are loving, then] you are patient, you are kind, you do not envy, you do not boast, you are not proud, you don't dishonour others, you are not self-seeking, you are not easily angered, you keep no record of wrongs, you don't delight in evil but rejoice with the truth, you always protect, always trust, always hope, and always persevere.

How do you think the Corinthians measured up to that? Well, from what we know, not very well.

So how do you think we measure up to that? How do you think you measure up to that? Because we need to consider these things as a congregation and as individuals,

Most of us struggle with patience, from time to time, I guess. We're probably mostly kind, most of the time. How do we go with envy? Or boastfulness? Or pride? Are we easily angered? I think keeping records of wrongs has made a resurgence in society generally in recent years. And often our own past wrongdoings weigh on our own hearts.

And what about the other side of things? Do we rejoice in the truth? Do we protect, trust, hope and persevere?

Sometimes it's hard to look at ourselves objectively, but we can use these lists that Paul gives as a way to see if our actions were motivated and carried out with love – and if our love for one another will be how people can tell that we are disciples of Jesus.

The love that we are called to show in our lives is everlasting. Again, because God is love. Love never fails.

In the last five verses of our reading, Paul explains to the Corinthians (and to us) that all spiritual gifts, and all things of the world will end.

And in the face of that, Paul tells the Corinthians to stop acting like children – to grow in faith, to grow in the knowledge and love of God – just like he has done: “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.” (13:11)

We have to change. As individuals, as a congregation and as the whole church. The past is the past, and now we need to grow. Maybe not in size, but we need to grow in knowledge, in faith, and in love.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians (4:11-15): “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”

And to the Colossians (1:28): “[Jesus] is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.”

Paul writes here to the Corinthians that “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.” We won't be made perfect this side of the new heaven and the new earth. But we have glimpses of perfection now. Mirrors today are pretty good, but they weren't so great in the first century.

Our love won't be perfect, we won't be perfect – but that's okay because God is perfect, and God is love.

Finally, Paul tells us (13:13) And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

One of the great standards of fiction – and perhaps non-fiction, is that when people come to the end of their lives, they regret all the time and energy they've spent on things that mean absolutely nothing to them on their deathbeds. There's that old aphorism “No one ever wrote ‘I wish I'd spent more time at work’ on their gravestone”.

Some people seem to measure their lives by accumulating wealth, others by being successful in whatever they do, and still others by being popular. But in the end, Paul tells us, none of that's going to last; it's all going to pass away.

So what is it that will last? Three things: faith, hope, and love – and the greatest of these is love.

Let's never forget that this is the most important thing we can work on, because without it, everything else is just distraction.

To finish with some words about love from the late American theologian Dr. Haddon Robinson:
“Love is that thing which, if a church has it, it doesn’t really need much else, and if it doesn’t have it, whatever else it has doesn’t really matter very much”.

And in the words of the apostle Paul, “Love never fails”.

Amen.