

## Love Has Value

Sermon for Estomihi – the Last Sunday before Lent

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 13



*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> 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 have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. <sup>4</sup> Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup> Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup> So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

On many stickers, in online ads, and in other media, love is defined with a short sentence which begins like this: “Love is...” Sometimes these “love is...” statements are funny, sometimes romantic, most often cheesy. Love is also a well-loved topic in newspapers, on the internet, and in discussion forums. It’s no wonder there is so much to talk about with love because love is not just an important part of being a human, it also expresses humanity’s deepest desires. Yet, no other human feeling has been so exploited as this word “love.” Next to this battered feeling - “love” - lie many corpses. There are hurt feelings, broken partnerships, betrayal. Love, which has descended from the very highest golden throne in heaven into everyday life, now must share its attention with cell phones, TV shows and movies, newspapers, and whatever else.

If you asked the Apostle Paul what love is, he would say: Love has value! By this, he means to say that there could be many other things that could be considered important or good... But if it were not for love, they would be of no use. You can really imagine his words like a scale. We can do many good things as Christians – prophesy, heal the sick, give money to the poor, fast... and Paul even places faith on the scale and surprisingly says: and if love were not added as an important component, it would all be useless. It is important to realize that Paul isn’t talking about the kind of love between a man and woman. No, he’s talking about God’s love. In the church in Corinth, this love given by God was not found – instead there was a supermarket full of Christian, spiritual gifts and other religious things. The Corinthians thought that they were a good and strong congregation because they had packed the spiritual shelves to the brim with various, impressive spiritual abilities. But even these Corinthians had neglected the most important thing, they had lost love. You can imagine it just like in a family: what first started with good intentions and what looked perfect, became, at some point, rotten inside and no longer holds true because love no longer found its way to the other family members and could no longer understand them. With the Corinthians, the outer framework was still good, but inside something had become rotten. That’s why something gradually changed in this congregation. Because love was no longer there, it was no longer about love itself, but only about who could be the greatest and the best. A terrible competition froze the congregation in selfishness, and they no longer realized why they were Christians and what God had called them to do.

Paul had heard about this and was indignant. The message about Christ and His love had completely deteriorated. The people were on the wrong path. That’s why he sent them a letter that promoted love with such passion. If I could speak in the languages of men and angels... if I could prophesy and know all mysteries... and if I gave all my possessions to the poor... Paul counts up the combined benefits of the congregation and continuously compares every single one against love. Love must be there. If love is not there, then we have missed the most

important thing. Everything else is interchangeable, just not love. How do we come to have such a love? Perhaps we hit the mark when we do everything that love requires of us. So we must do what the rich young ruler could not – at Jesus' request, give everything to the poor. Giving of ourselves beyond the limit so that others have an advantage and we ideally do not. The rich young ruler couldn't do all that at the time. He didn't have what it took. Honestly, the danger isn't exactly that we, like the rich young ruler, want to aim high and yet cannot. Perhaps the greatest betrayal of love lies precisely in the fact that I want the intoxication of loving myself more than I want to love others! And then I still place myself before Christ's judgement seat and look at my fellow humans: "Thank you, God, that I'm not like this person!" I already notice in this example that love can't get by without the other person. Love can't just be kept to oneself. If love loses sight of the other person, it becomes distorted into the opposite of what it is – it becomes selfish, forced, and proud. Love is therefore not a strength that I could train in my innermost being and thus become better and better at it. No, love doesn't manifest itself in my heart, but it manifests itself in togetherness. Love mostly has to do with hard to deal with people. What complicated, hard to understand, and easily vulnerable creatures we humans are! Anyone who observes an argument from the outside can't believe that people are arguing about something like this. But whoever is part of the argument knows that just the small trifles hurt the deep hopes and desires... and so deteriorate them into terrible bitterness. And then the ego rises again with all its desires and cries out its injury with the following sentence: "The other person must be different! I will love him... but he must change first!" We quickly notice that the Apostle Paul is talking about a completely different kind of love than the one that we know. The love that Paul speaks about thinks so much about others that it sides with the other person and not with itself... It does not attribute evil, it asks: should there really be something bad? And if there is, it simply says: I don't credit evil to it. Paul talks about a love that transcends all boundaries. It bears all things, endures all things. Even if it is disappointed a thousand times, it never loses hope. Let's put it bluntly – the way that Paul talks about love here is not how we think of love. However, it accurately portrays Jesus and describes Him. Actually, every single time love is spoken of in 1 Corinthians 13, the same thing could be said of Jesus. Every sentence describes Jesus and fits His person exactly and not us. If we were to read the entirety of 1 Corinthians as an invitation that we must have such love, we would fail from the very beginning because we are and remain self-centered in love. More has to change than our actions... our innermost beings must change; our character must change. The one who loves must be different than us. Paul speaks about this towards the end of this passage. The love he talks about is not rooted in our hearts, it goes totally beyond our horizon and connects eternity with our world.

Here, two things come together that actually don't belong together. There is on the one side our human, faulty love that is always selfish, and then there is God's love which is established and rooted in eternity. It is a contradiction... just like the incarnation of Christ contradicts our reason. The eternal God becomes mortal, becomes temporal... and shares His love with us. He didn't come to love His disciples and contemporaries just once. No, His love is much greater and is also meant to encompass much more than just the few contemporaries of His time. Paul is certain that nothing can separate him from this love of God (as he writes in Romans 8:38-39). It is manifested in Jesus Christ. That's why it is the greatest, most important gift. And God poured out this love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, so much so that this love overflows to our neighbors too.

If you look closely, we notice that 1 Corinthians 13 is not just about love, it's also about faith. Love is serious about how God views humanity. Love views others with the eyes of God. That means that God loves us, not because we are valuable on our own – we are valuable because He loves us. And the same is true for my neighbor. God loves my neighbor not because that person is so loveable – that person is loveable because God loves him too. That's why you can change all these "love is..." statements that want to be cheesy, funny, or romantic. When we say, "love is...", we can end the sentence with one word – Love is God. Amen.