

Αγαπε
I Corinthians 13
Colebrook Congregational Church
January 31, 2016 / Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

Whenever I hear this scripture, I am reminded of the movie, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. It is read aloud by a character called, George the Boor, and he says the first line in an annoying voice, “If I speak with the tongues of men and angels but have not love, I am as a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” One of the main characters responds: “Good Point.”

I have spent the majority of this week studying this chapter in Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. It seems to be one of the more debated passages, in terms of how to translate the word that describes the core concept into English, in the New Testament. Everything that I will be talking about today will be in reference to the New Testament only, and does not apply to the Old Testament. I just want to be clear on that. The English translations of the New Testament come down to us through many translators but they all can be split into two camps. They were either based on the original language of the New Testament, Koine Greek; OR based on the Vulgate, which was the Latin translation of the Koine Greek. It got to the point where I had to just focus on a couple translations to compare. The King James Version, which was based on the Latin Vulgate; and the New Revised Standard Version, which is based on the Koine Greek. All the rest, while they are milestones in Bible history, will just muddy the waters. And besides, they are not widely used today.

Okay, so focusing on those two translations, the actual differences are usually minor and are in the form of nouns, like unicorn versus rhinoceros. There is a big style difference, one is meant to be more lyrical and a work of art, the other is meant for studying and understanding. I did spend a lot of time with a third type of Bible, called an Interlinear Bible. That is the most literal translation of the Bible. Each word is translated literally with the English word written under each Koine Greek word, is cross-referencible with a concordance, and in the margins the English is reordered to reflect syntax differences. My copy of this type of Bible is back on the hutch at the top of the stairs down to Fellowship Hall if anyone is interested in looking at it.

Anyway, the word describing the core concept is different in these two

translations. Where other differences still allow you to come away with a similar understanding of what is going on and what is meant. But when it is the key word and concept, extra legwork must be done!

Now we heard the NRSV read aloud a few minutes ago, and is in front of you right now. I am going to read the first four verses again, but from the King James Version. Follow along to note the big difference.

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become *as* sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have *the gift of* prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, *and* is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,”

It's the word charity. These verses are among the most popular in the Bible, are used on television & in movies for weddings, and is also used in real weddings! It doesn't sound quite the same with charity instead of love. Here's the problem. The Greek word Paul uses, as we see from the King James Version, can also be translated as “charity.” The reason for this is that in the Vulgate, the Latin word used is *caritas*. People seem to think, understandably, that it is relationship love or romantic love that is the core concept here. I've talked several times before that Greek has multiple words for Love and they are referring to different concepts, but we translate them all as just one word. Taken out of context, we have assumed that it is *ερος*, the romantic love. Maybe even *φιλια*, the love between friends or comrades. But it's neither of them. It's *αγαπε*, the divine love. And, it turns out that *caritas* means altruistic love, as well.

So to understand this chapter better, I reread it inserting different words before love. So I tried “God's Love.” Didn't work so much. “Divine Love.” Same. “Selfless Love.” Aha! That worked!

Paul is using a certain kind of love word, not for affection toward an adorable object, but one referencing the grace received by humanity, that we cannot return to God directly, only through loving our fellow humans in the same way. A selfless love.

Now, to put this chapter into context. Corinth was the Sin City of the ancient world, filled with vices, and Paul is using a word for love that has an element of reverence to it. It was not a common word back then, nor even in classical Greek writings. Mostly, if it was used, it was as a verb. And Paul is very bold using this word for a spiritual type of love, especially toward those Corinthians, considering the reputation of the city.

And the Church in Corinth was in conflict. There are interpersonal relationship issues and arguments over doctrine and proper practices, causing internal divisions. Paul addressed the arguments with his teachings throughout this Letter, and now it seems to me that he is addressing the interpersonal relationships. And because of this lesson directed toward this group about how the group behaves inwardly, I see it as different from all the other Commandments to love God and neighbor. All the other times, it is directed towards an individuals' actions, but here I see it as an internal group action. Expressions of selfless, altruistic, spiritual love as a group, through all the parts of the group, not just an individual acting on their own.

In the first part, Paul describes how great actions, if they are devoid of that love with spiritual qualities, they amount to nothing. You could speak eloquently and speak well in tongues, but they are without value if done without *αγαπε*. Working wonders are just an external display if *αγαπε* does not provide the motive for those wonders. The third verse is a euphemism to living an ascetic life, however, if those actions are not done for *αγαπε*, then it is not truly a virtue.

Now to the main part, Paul describes *αγαπε* and why it is better and why they should direct themselves toward it. After all, it's not a common word, and the Corinthians have a history of taking things the wrong way, so Paul probably wants to make sure they understand what *αγαπε* is!

Αγάπε is patient, kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Αγάπε does not run roughshod over the rest of the group, insisting on their way. Αγάπε is not resentful nor irritable. Αγάπε rejoices in truth & honesty, not evil. Αγάπε quietly endures no matter what. Αγάπε is what the members of the Church in Corinth should strive for to solve their problems with each other. That altruistic and selfless love, if they all remembered to show it towards one another, then everything else will start falling into place and their divisions would cease.

While Paul or Apollos was in Corinth, they were able to keep everything in place and running smoothly, but they could not stay there indefinitely. And whenever they left, problems happened.

I have preached a lot about love. It is the central tenet of our faith, so it should feature prominently! However, most of my illustrations have been about the individual acting alone, not in a group relationship like what Paul is talking about here. It is a bit more nuanced, as well. Individuals acting with Αγάπε in the group, selflessly, for the benefit of the community, not just for themselves or their subdivision.

I was reminded of the monthly meetups for the New England Steampunks. They were held at and organized by a museum in Waltham, MA. I started attending as a member, and after a year or so, I was asked to organize the programming for the museum. It was extra work for me, and I did not want to at first, but I could see that the museum staff was burning out, and I did not want the group to suffer, so I did it with the help of some friends. Some time later, the directorship of the museum passed to someone else, who did not want to have any involvement with our group, so we suddenly found ourselves without a home.

I had to make a decision. Do I save this group by pulling together all those involved from all over New England and find some way to make it work? Or do I just let the New England group die, and let something else take its place? The latter option would have been easier. Walk away, do my own things, use my time in other ways. But I couldn't do that. Without this group, there would not be a New England identity within the steampunk community as a

whole. The individual groups from each of the states would have just replaced the monthly meetup with ones in their area. We had sit down discussions and the group was sub-dividing by their home states. If any of those groups had taken over, it was going to be in pursuit their goals, not the larger community. Groups pulling toward moving to Norwich, CT, or a town up in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, or to Boston, or to Portsmouth, or Providence. Nothing in the middle, everyone was pulling to extremes. If you're from Maine, you wouldn't want to drive to Norwich every month, or up to the White Mountains if you're from Colebrook.

I sat there, appalled. No one seemed to be concerned about our larger community. About the fellowship, the networking, and interdisciplinary creativity that was fostered by bringing so many people from so many different backgrounds together. Each group was more worried about their groups' own self-interest than what could be achieved by the larger group of all of us working together towards common goals that are greater than the sum of our parts.

I decided to continue leading the programming. I was not a part of any of the smaller state groups, and so I was luckily viewed as mostly impartial. I came up with short term & long term goals that everyone could agree on and form a consensus, and re-established a New England identity for us. I kept meeting with the smaller groups and their leaders encouraging them to think about how what they do affects all of us, and to remember that they are needed as part of the larger group. To think not just about their own group, but to think altruistically, to think with *Αγαπε*.

It was hard work to do this, but I knew that it had to be done. I was not sure if it was worth it, and could have walked away at any time. I used to produce a new large project once a year, on average, and be more involved in creating art. However, since I started running the group without the museum, I have not created any new art. I have felt such anger and resentment about this. I've asked myself, why am I putting myself through this and giving up some things that I love to do? Has all this been worth it? But I kept feeling the Spirit moving me to continue.

Relatively recently, I started seeing that it was worth it. Many of you may have noticed that when I am not up here in this pulpit, I am usually a lot quieter and I am not trying to be at the center of things. I have taken to heart Jesus' command to not be boastful, and try to follow that and be modest in all things. So, when I learned that I was being introduced and spoken about at a national level as “a major New England Steampunk,” I was mortified and upset about being called that. I tried to put a stop to it, but I was reminded by them of what I had done to keep our regional identity and cooperation together, how I kept the smaller state groups at the table and changed the way they did things and how they viewed themselves and others; and to just be quiet and accept the accolade.

By the very nature of the word *αγαπε*, Paul is reminding the Corinthians that God has been long-suffering and gracious towards humanity, and therefore, they must show the same attitude toward our fellow humans in their group. That is how they will solve any interpersonal relationship issues! Embody *αγαπε* and their divisions will reunite.

Every group of people has issues within it. No group is immune, none are perfect. But that does not mean the group should not strive for it. Paul is giving us interpersonal relationship advice that be useful for any group of people. And all you need is one person in the group to step up and embody *Αγαπε*, and though it may take time and hardship, others will see that example and do the same. Think of what could be accomplished by one selfless person, and then imagine what a whole group, a whole community of people embodying *Αγαπε* can accomplish!

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

O God, we thank you for Paul's lesson, and we pray that we are able to take it to heart. That *Αγαπε* is patient. Caritas is kind. Selfless love rejoices in truth. Altruistic love bears, hopes, and endures all things. Love never ends. We are thankful for your love for us, and we pray that we are able to respond by sharing that love with others, and that we remember that as we live out our faiths together in our community. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

O God, We give you thanks for all the blessings and gifts you have given us, for those you have led into our lives and for moving us into the lives of others. And we thank you for using us as instruments of your divine love for us all.

We pray for the forgiveness of sins known and unknown, for falling short of how we should be towards ourselves, towards our fellow humans, and to all of Your Creation. May we reassured of Your forgiveness, so we may try to do better and make amends as we move forward.

We pray for everyone who needs Your help. For those who are unwell or wounded in mind, body, or spirit. We pray to be of assistance if we can, and for all those who have dedicated their lives to helping others. We pray to bring comfort to the lonely, shelter to the exposed and vulnerable, and nourishment to the hungry. May you fortify us to better serve you through our service to our neighbors.

We pray for ourselves. We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, to live up to the standard Jesus set for us. We pray that we recognize your messengers and those You send to help us and redirect us for who they are, and that we show the wisdom to heed them.

We especially pray for:

Gracious God, we offer these prayers and all those of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 71:1-6

71:1 In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame.

71:2 In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me.

71:3 Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.

71:4 Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.

71:5 For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth.

71:6 Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

13:1 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. 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. 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.

13:4 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.

13:8 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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 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. 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.