



# *First Congregational United Church of Christ*

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## **Fourth Sunday of Epiphany**

**January 30, 2022**

*We are delighted that you joined us today! We hope you will find us an affirming, uplifting, and committed family of faith. Here we work to make everyone, without any exceptions, to feel accepted, inspired, and encouraged in their spiritual journey. In dialogue, we seek to understand. In encouragement, we seek to heal. In all things we yearn to live by love, for peace, with joy. This is a place where your intellect will be challenged, your heart will be nurtured, and your spirit refreshed. Varying beliefs are expressed openly and freely, and your doubts will not be suppressed. We trust that we are all, every person and part of creation, continuing to be blessed by God's grace; and that in community we can help each other to see this grace alive in our lives and relationships. We hope to share our gifts with you, even as we pray that you will want to share your gifts with us. Whoever you are and wherever you may be in your life's journey, we invite you to be a part of our lives and our spiritual home. Welcome!*

### **POINTS TO PONDER**

*“<sup>13</sup>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. <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 do not have love, I am nothing.”*

*— I Corinthians 13.1-2*

“Paul has, in the previous chapter, enumerated some of the gifts that are part of the community of Christ. Each of these gifts is instrumental for the benefit of the whole community. And yet Paul had noticed that people had become divided, with some thinking their gifts were superior, and others being told that theirs were inferior. Paul actually believes some gifts, like prophecy, are indeed better gifts than those like the speaking and interpreting of languages. But his point was that none of these gifts are so important that they should cause dissension among people. Each gift, even the least of them, is still necessary for the good of the whole. And so his point is that we should not compare our gifts, as doing so is a detriment to the building up of community in the body of Christ.

But whereas he spoke of each gift as essential to the good of the whole, here he proclaims that one gift, one which we all have by nature given that God endowed us all with it, is the greatest gift of all: love. While he has said all the other gifts are important, even necessary, to complete the body of Christ, he takes on a nuanced

perspective here in claiming that the virtue or gift of love is the supreme virtue or gift among them all. Indeed, without it, the one by which all the others gain their significance, the other gifts would be meaningless. It is only by those gifts being used with the motive and purpose of love that they are considered blessings.

If we could speak and interpret many languages, but our words were not loving, then the gift of languages would be an irritant – like a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. Words of love, however, can bless, inspire, and transform people and communities. Likewise, if one had all knowledge and faith, and even had prophetic powers, but didn't use them for the purpose of building up love among people, then those wonderful gifts would be empty of value. Indeed, they could even be used for evil.

And so simply having a gift is not itself a blessing unless we use the gift to bless people with love. We might think it is awesome to have prophetic powers to transform people's behaviors; but if they are transformed for the worse rather than the better, then the blessing is lost. We might think that to have all the knowledge in the world would be splendid because we could speak factually and truthfully about every subject known to humanity. But what good is it to be respected for our powers of knowing if people can't respect how we use that knowledge? And who wouldn't want such faith that you could proverbially move mountains, not letting anything you attempt to do stand in your way from accomplishing what you have faith to do? And yet, if your goals are not praise-worthy and virtuous, and done for the sake of loving the world and all that are in it, then Paul claims that we are spiritually and morally a 'nothing' of a person.

We need to have loving motives, intentions, ambitions, and goals. The point of a life well lived is not simply to have impressive gifts, but to use those gifts in the right way – in a loving way. Whatever we do in life, we need to ask ourselves if it is loving. If it is, then may God bless us – for we will help create a better world. But if it isn't, then we are actually a detriment to the harmony and peace of the world by our non-loving ways. Paul, in essence, is saying that what we might consider to be 'successful' in this life, i.e., having gifts we use and are admired for, is not worthy of our time and efforts. Love alone is worthy of our time and efforts. It is the only thing that matters. Do we agree with him?"

– Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/24/2021

"<sup>3</sup>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."

– I Corinthians 13.3

"Jesus had once said to try to outdo one another in being good. However, he didn't mean it the way some people took it – to literally try to be better than others and to diminish them in the process. Apparently, some of the Corinthians took Jesus' command to give away all their possessions to heart, and some may have even been martyred for the cause. This certainly shows their commitment to Christ's teachings and ways. However, if they did it to gain a reward, say of heaven, rather than for the correct motive of love itself, then it is in vain.

Doing things for the sake of love, and for no other reason, sanctifies our actions. Our actions may seem impressive to the community for what we do if they don't know the motive behind our actions; but it is the motive of love that God looks for, and it is for love alone that God wants us to do what we do. Anytime we act in seemingly magnanimous ways, but for the reason of boasting, being esteemed in others' eyes, or any other selfish motive, we corrupt our actions. Love is the lone purifier of our motives; and when we act by love, our motives are made pure."

– Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/24/2021

"<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or 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 in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth."

– I Corinthians 13.4-6

“The Greeks had many words that denoted ‘love.’ There is family love, friendship love, passionate or erotic love, civic or community love, and many others. But Paul is using the word, agape, here which denotes a magnanimous and unconditional love. Agape love has a host of characteristics not available to all of the other forms of love. While some other forms may be characterized by patience, kindness, and other positive attributes, none but agape blends all of these traits into one such that one also is not envious, boastful, or rude.

Agape is gentle, even tender; though it can be firm, and forthright. However, it does not display irritability or resentment; for it, being a virtue of God, understands the mistakes of others and tries to correct and encourage others to do better rather than criticize or condescend to others. Never would agape rejoice in wrongdoing, which would be its opposite vice. Rather, it rejoices in truth; not facts, but the truth of God’s love for us and the love we are to have for one another.

People will err in their actions and even betray relationships; but agape seeks to improve our behaviors and restore our relationships with a love that holds us accountable to love itself. The too typical response of people abandoning others when they have not lived up to expectations, or have even injured the relationship, is not something that agape love would ever allow. Agape does not insist on the way of the one who loves, nor disparages the other – even when the other person has violated the covenant of love itself. Agape love is the arch virtue of God, and we are to let that virtue live in us through the Spirit of love that lets us love one another as we love ourselves.”

– *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/24/2021*

“<sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

– *I Corinthians 13.7*

“It is in the context of these aforementioned characteristics of agape that we are to hear these words of Paul. We are not to take him literally in saying love bears ALL things no matter what, or that it believes ALL things no matter how untrue, or that it hopes ALL things no matter how silly, insignificant, or morally defunct, or that it endures ALL things including abuse, blaspheming the Spirit of love itself, or other things in which are the very antithesis of love.

No, love will not act for the detriment of itself and the promotion of that which undermines and sabotages love. To read Paul in this way is blatantly unfair, and disregards the characteristics he has just mentioned about love – most notably that it won’t rejoice in, or condone, wrongdoing.

To love magnanimously will often result in a lack of reciprocity by others to love you back in the same way. Most people don’t love so abundantly and beautifully. And so, the person who loves with agape will have to bear all the heartaches, disillusionment, and sadness of knowing that it is most usually an unrequited love. People will take advantage of you. People will betray your trust. People will say they will love you, and then won’t. It takes a toll on the lover’s soul to see that others are not as pure in their motives as one’s self.

And when that happens, when we get dejected about others not being as loving, we have to fight our inner desires for receiving love by continuing to focus on being loving. This requires that we believe that love will win in the end – even if “the end” is long after we are gone. It means we will choose to believe in love and its value in all of our relationships, even when we are thoroughly convinced that others will not be so generous in their love for us. This is precisely the supererogatory nature of agape.

Agape, being unconditional (insofar as it does not act against its own nature so as to harm itself), is not motivated by whether the other person(s) deserve our love or are willing to give back as much love as we give. Rather it is about our character in continuing to be loving no matter what they may do. Those who love genuinely put their full trust in love itself; not the objects and persons to whom their love is directed. They have

the strength to keep on loving because their strength is not derived from the results of their actions, but rather the goodness and virtue of their actions.

The loving person loves out of character/Spirit, not the yearning to receive that love in return. Granted, we may still all want to receive that love in return, but that is not to be the motive for why we love with agape love. It may be true of most other forms of love, but not of that magnanimous love that believes in love itself.

For this reason, the person who loves for the sake of loving, because they see love as the greatest virtue to habituate and live by regardless of the results of doing so, will be able to endure all spiritual, emotional, ethical, and other quandaries of existence. The one who loves genuinely endures all the negative responses of an unloving world; for receiving love in kind for oneself is not the reason for why one loves. One loves out of the goodness and joy of one's heart.

Sure, it would be great to be loved like that in return; but that is unlikely. And to 'give only to get' is not as admirable as to give for the joy and love of giving. Even in the body of Christ, the place where we should be loved most unconditionally, we often aren't. Paul's exhortations to the Corinthians is testimony to this fact. They are not loving as they are supposed to love. They are not loving as Christ loved. At least not all of them; perhaps even most of them. But Paul continues to bear with them, believe in them, and hope that they finally come to love as God would have them to do.

And the point of his message is not convince them to trust that everyone will indeed come to love this way, but rather to encourage those who take on this commitment to love as Christ loved in heart, mind, body, and soul to continue to have hope and faith in love itself – even when we can't see other people living up to that kind of love.

To love as Christ love is a lonely existence. Too few love that radically, selflessly, and magnanimously. Too few know the joy and blessing that comes for loving for the sake of love rather than seeking to gain something from loving others. While people who love genuinely will not bear, believe, hope, and endure ALL things (viz., those things that contradict love itself, which even Jesus himself could not bear and tolerate), they will bear, believe, hope, and endure all other things in which keeps them faithfully loving.

Jesus had his heart broken by the hateful and unjust actions of others, his spirit suffered because of their waywardness and intransigence, and his body was broken by their cruelty and malice. And yet, he still loved them; not for what they did, but for the beings he believed they could be...for the beings God had created them to be. Like Jesus, we are to bear with these struggles, keep on believing and hoping in love itself, and, come what may, bear and endure whatever circumstances that occur because of where love leads us to be."

– *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/24/2021*

"<sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end."

– *1 Corinthians 13.8-10*

"These words have consternated many theologians who are unfamiliar with Greek ethics, and how it relates to Hebrew spirituality in the thought of Paul (and even Jesus, I'd argue). Love outlives us all. We end, but not love. And whatever ways we loved on this earth will, mysteriously, survive us.

Are we not still positively affected by the love of those who loved us even though they have now passed into life eternal? Love is a force or energy that permeates reality; for God created all reality, and God created it with love and out of love. This is why love never ends. Being the arch virtue of God, it cannot be defeated eternally.

Prophecies that promote justice for all peoples will inspire and transform people such that there will no longer be a need for prophecies. That prophecies will eventually end whenever all become loving is the implication Paul is making. Human languages, too, will cease in Paul's speculation, likely because we will all come to know the language of love.

Paul even sees knowledge ending, as knowing to the ancient mind need not survive once people unite the virtues within them such that they do instinctually what is right and good. Socrates and Plato, for example, believed that to 'know the good is to do the good.' And Aristotle, their pupil, believed that when we habitually come to do the good, we no longer think in categories of knowing what is right and wrong and having to decide what is right and wrong; for right is born into the virtuous person such that they no longer have to think about or question such things. Virtue lives in us; becomes us.

To 'know' is always a 'partial' understanding in Greek philosophy. But to unite the virtues in oneself is to have 'complete' or 'perfect' understanding and to be a 'complete' or 'perfected' human being – one who acts in accordance with virtue with no forethought or judgment, but as the manifestation of the virtues being united in one's self in perception, thought, word, action, and character.

This unity of the virtues that forms the virtuous character is essentially the same concept as the Hebrew concept of 'The Spirit.' (The main difference being that 'Spirit' is more relational in nature, whereas the 'unity of virtues,' while able to live in anyone who habituates virtues, is construed more individually within only those persons and friends who live by the virtues). When the Spirit is with us, we act only out of goodness and virtue; i.e., we become 'perfected' in the Spirit of God/Christ/Love. It becomes our own spirit – living within and through us, and eventually among us when others, too, let the Spirit live in them. The partial disappears when the complete/perfect is developed into our lives."

– *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/24/2021*

"<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 an adult, I put an end to childish ways."

– *1 Corinthians 13.11*

"Paul likely had a strong working knowledge of Greek philosophy as an educated man of his day. Paul seems to have adopted their concept of intellectual and ethical development, and applied it to spiritual development as well. Aristotle believed that we have a progression of ethical development (presuming we don't go the other way into vice) in which we start out with 1) a 'weak will' (one in which we want to do the good, but are not strong enough in will to do it often), 2) develop a 'strong will' (one in which we want to do the good, and through habituation of good actions and practices, do good most, but not all of the time), and then 3) finally climax in our development when we become one with the virtues (i.e., doing what is virtuously naturally by having created a virtuous character over many decades of habitually doing good).

For Paul, we start out as a child with this weakness of resolve, progress to youth and young to middle adulthood in having a more formed character committed to Christ, but then become a mature or complete adult when the Spirit lives within us. When the Spirit comes into us, we no longer have need of our childish, youthful, or younger adult ways. We have progressed beyond them and now are one in the Spirit of God/Christ/Love.

We shall see that love, the cardinal virtue of God and Christ Jesus, is the virtue that is epitomized by the Spirit living in us. Indeed, it is the only thing, as he said above, that really matters. And of even the highest ranking virtues, love reigns supreme over all of them. They are all to be lived out in accordance with love itself. They are to promote and enhance love in our lives, relationships, and world.

When we adopt love as our community standard, Paul believes that we can truly live in love, not only individually but collectively, as the body of Christ in this world. That is when we all grow up, and put an end to

childishness in our relationships – things like he mentioned above that love is not; e.g., envious, boastful, rude, insistent on its own way, irritable, resentful, and even rejoicing in wrongdoing. Instead, love is epitomized by being patient, kind, and rejoicing in the truth while bearing, believing, hoping, and enduring all things that makes for loving, mature, adult community.”

– *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/124/2021*

“<sup>12</sup>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.”

– *I Corinthians 13.12*

“Mirrors in Paul’s time were not glass, but sheets of metal. And so they did indeed ‘dimly’ reflect images placed in front of them. Paul sees the Corinthian community as not yet developed spiritually and ethically. They are still spiritual children, and they still have not adopted agape love for one another. When they do, then they will see each other face to face – as they really are as siblings of one another, and sacred children of God, one and all. They will no longer rank people’s worth or value in accordance to their particular gifts, but will see that the only gift that matters is the gift of love.

When that happens, they will no longer see in part, but fully/completely/perfectly. This is how God sees us and how we are fully known by God. God sees the love within us, and God loves us despite our refusal to love as prolifically, maturely, and extravagantly as God does. When we have finally received the Spirit in our lives, we will know fully, and be fully known – not only by God, but by one another. Wouldn’t that be wonderful!”

– *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/24/2021*

“<sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

– *I Corinthians 13.13*

“The climax of the chapter is in this final verse. So often people have misunderstood Jesus and Paul in thinking that some other virtue or character trait is the one we should focus on and develop most. For some it is faith. Faith for Jesus and Paul and all of the disciples is not what many American Christians mean by faith. For them, it was not mere belief in the right things, but a disciplined life of living in accordance with one’s beliefs...of practicing one’s values in daily life...of sharing our gifts with one another. Again, faith in this way is definitely a good thing, but unless it is informed and motivated by, and done for the purpose of, love then it is pointless. Jesus and Paul did indeed speak of the importance of faith, but faith was subordinate to love for both of them. It is our ‘faith in love,’ not faith in whatever, or faith by itself, that makes our life closer to God and to one another. Faith without love, and faith which is not for love, is meaningless.

Likewise, hope, whether in becoming a good person (the things Jesus and Paul were concerned about in most hoping for us), or in wishing to go to heaven (the things too many American Christians are concerned about in most hoping for themselves), is a perversion if the hope is not rooted in love and bears the fruit of love. We need to hope for the right things, and with the right motives. Hope that is not connected to love, and doesn’t have love as its ultimate goal, is not a hope that is sacred. It is not the hope that God would have us yearn for in our lives.

Faith and hope are important virtues to have, but love alone is the greatest virtue of them all. In Greek understanding a cardinal virtue like love is one in which envelops all of the other virtues. If we love genuinely, we will be patient, kind, just, gentle, caring, courageous, wise, and so on. Love is not a feeling; nor is it an attitude or temporary disposition. It is a character trait, and therefore something that is always with us at all times.

The Hebrew understanding is quite similar. The cardinal virtue of love is the one that most characterizes the essence and Spirit of God. It is the reason for why and how God created all things. It is how God endowed all

things. It is how God wants us all to live with one another. Love is the one virtue, encapsulating all of the others, that will bring peace on the earth as it is in heaven, that will let justice roll into our lives like an ever-flowing stream, that will bless every person and creature, great and small, upon this earth so that they may live in blessed harmony.

When Jesus was asked what is the greatest of all the commandments, he said it was love. And he added that love was the fulfillment of the entire law; that is, completed all of the other virtues, which lived within the greater virtue of love. Love fulfills the law because it contains all the other virtues for which the law tried to get people to live by in their lives. But love was more than the accumulation of all parts of the law. It was the synergism of all of these virtues working together for the common good of love itself.

We need to live by the Spirit of love, not just laws principled in love for one another. In other words, like the Greeks had said, it needs to come from our character; not just our ethical principles. We need the virtues to live in us; not simply be things we practice from time to time. Our spirit needs to be made one with God's Spirit; else we will at best have a strong will that won't always have us acting in accordance with God's love in our lives. We are, as Jesus said, to be perfected in love; to love as God loves. It was to be a total immersion into God's Spirit, such that our own spirit no longer remained. It was to be all or nothing. And that hard concept is why we 21<sup>st</sup> century people have such difficulty in understanding the magnitude of what Jesus and Paul were asking of us in becoming the body of Christ. We can no longer be our own individual bodies. We are absorbed into the collective Spirit of Christ that transforms our very being – one in which we are completed/perfected in love...the greatest of all gifts. It is the gift that is greater than our own selves; the gift to which we are to dedicate our entire lives to serve and prosper.”

– Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/24-25/2021

## **CALLED TOGETHER AS SPIRITUAL FAMILY**

**Prelude**

Hudson Lourenço

**Welcome and Announcements**

Kerri Mennenga

**Affirming God's Presence in Us All**

“You Matter!”

Welcome to First Congregational United Church of Christ of Waterloo, Iowa – a community of faith where you matter! God has created you to matter, and we believe that you do matter! You matter whether you are poor or rich, unknown or famous, sick or healthy, homeless, homebound, or having a home. You matter as a Black or Brown person, or a person whose skin color is neither of these; for differing pigmentation is the beauty and splendor of diversity. You matter no matter what are your abilities or disabilities, your successes or failures; for your worth is in who you are, not what you can or can't do. You matter as a person of faith, one seeking faith, one who wrestles with the very idea of faith, or even one who claims to have no faith at all. You matter as a transgendered person, a female, a male, or one whose gender identity is none of the above. You matter whether you are an immigrant, a Native American, a citizen, a refugee, or a visitor or a transplant from another nationality – for we are all the children of God and are created equally in our worth. You matter if LGBTQIA+ fits your sexual orientation, as well as if it doesn't – for God made us all as we are, and we trust that loving people as they are is what really matters. You matter no matter your age, ethnicity, mental or emotional or physical attributes, or family structure. Single, married, or neither of the two makes no difference on whether you matter to God or to us. You do! You are a person of inestimable worth, who we believe needs to be loved just as you need to love others. We all matter here, for we are a community who values all persons – no exceptions. Welcome to this haven of hope where we always want you to know, and to feel, that YOU MATTER!

## Welcoming the Light of Love in Our Midst

Kerri Mennenga

*We prepare ourselves for communing with the sacred as love's light is brought into our awareness. The light of love burns within and among each of us, and we carry that light into our sanctuary; visually reminding us of the image of the divine that lives in our hearts, minds, and souls – and that we nourish through our faith-filled fellowship.*

### \*Centering Our Souls

“Because Love Is....” Inspired by I Corinthians 13

Kerri Mennenga

Imaginer and Giver of Love, life's greatest gift, teach us how to creatively love one another and all of creation.

**Because love is patient, help us to restrain our reactive impulses and consider how to best love others after fully hearing their story.**

Because love is kind, help us to be mindful of how an expression, a word, a deed, and our commitment to care for others can bless their lives.

**Because love is not envious, boastful, or rude, help us to be the content with the love we have received, to graciously and humbly give our love without thought of pride, and to always seek to help others rather than impose our will upon them.**

Because love is not insistence upon its own way, is not irritable, or resentful, help us to put your way, not our own, first...to seek to understand rather than to judge...and to be wakefully grateful for life's presence of blessings rather than to be disdainfully upset at what did not become a blessing.

**Because love is rejoiceful in the truth, and never in wrongdoing, help us to tilt our minds towards wisdom, to bend our hearts towards understanding, and to focus our spirits on discovering and acting on your values in our lives.**

Because love is a virtue that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things, help us to develop souls that are resilient, faithful, expectant, and persevering.

**Because love is never-ending, help us to put our trust in it over all other values, for in doing so we unite your Spirit with ours.**

We are thankful for the gift of love that you have instilled in each and every one of us, and so we ask for your insight in how we can better bestow this gift to others each and every day of our lives.

**For in loving as you love us, we help bring our hopes to reality and we help to make our faith a way of life.**

May our hope and faith be in love – that Spirit which you so want us to have fully so that we may share it in all of our relationships and to all the world.

**Because love is the greatest of all gifts, help us to be the greatest of givers; now and always. Blessings may we be.**

## WE LISTEN FOR THE SACRED IN THE MIDST OF OUR LIVES

### \*Hymn of Epiphany Light

“Arise, Your Light is Come”

#164

### A Time for All God's Children

Abbie Chronister

### Prayers

*Sharing Our Joys & Concerns, and Acts of Compassion or Kindness*

*Silent Meditation: The Prayers of the People*

*Pastoral Prayer*

*The Prayer Jesus Taught* (unison) *Translated directly from the Aramaic by Jon Marc Hammer*

Father-Mother of the Cosmos, Shimmering Light of All: Focus your Light Within us, as we breathe Your Holy Breath. Enter the sanctuary of our hearts, uniting within us the sacred rays Of Your Power and Beauty. Let Your Heart's desire unite heaven and earth through our sacred union. On earth, as it is in heaven. Help us fulfill what lies within the circle of our lives today. Forgive our secret fears as we freely choose to forgive the secret fears of others. Let us not enter forgetfulness, tempted by false appearances. For from Your astonishing Fire



comes the Eternal Song which sanctifies all, renewed eternally in our lives, and throughout all creation. We seal these words in our hearts, committed in trust and faith.

### Scripture Lesson

I Corinthians 13

Kerri Mennenga

<sup>13.1</sup>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. <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 do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or 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 in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <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 an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

### Message

“The Greatest Gift: Love, and the Encouragement and Expectations It Gives”

### \*Hymn of Epiphany Light

“Arise, Your Light is Come”

#164

### \*Hymn for the Hope of Love

“Share Now Our Love”

*Tune: Gather Us In, Irregular; Words: Rev. Bret Stuart Myers, 9/29/2021*

1. Once long ago, a Rabbi came preaching,

turn now your hearts for God is so near.

You who have sought, and still now are reaching:

Hear the good news that will strengthen and cheer!

Share now our love, and make it surprising;

share now our love, and let it be seen!

We are the yeast for justice arising;

we will lift up those who once were unseen.

2. Are you prepared for life lived most daring?

Are you prepared for how you might grow?

Will you be one who's constantly caring?

Will you be one who will mercy bestow?

Share now your love, and sow it with gladness.

Share now your love, the fields do await!

You are the one who takes away sadness;

you are the one who will not yield to fate.

3. We do not think that love is a danger;

by our compassion we live by light.

We'll be the ones who comfort the strangers;

we'll be the ones who will take away fright.

We'll share our love with sisters and brothers.

We'll share our love with those we don't know.

We are to all earth's children a mother;

we are the lanterns whose wicks ever glow.

4. By our ideals, we plant for tomorrow.  
By our ideals we overcome fear.  
We've come to trust that we cannot borrow,  
time that's ill-used not to dry the earth's tears.  
Share now our love to those who are aching;  
share now our love to weak ones and poor.  
We'll speak for them till systems are shaking;  
we'll be the ones who will open love's door.

5. We want a world of peace without ending.  
We want a world where all have enough.  
We are the people God is still sending;  
making our way, though the journey is rough.  
When we share love, our hope will grow stronger.  
When we share love, our faith will abound.  
Come, heed God's call, don't wait any longer;  
the love through our deeds will stun and astound.

### **WE DEDICATE OURSELVES TO GOD'S SERVICE THROUGH FAITHFULNESS**

**Giving of Our Tithes and Offerings** *We invite you to give online or by mail. Thank you!*  
*"Generosity arises from gratitude like heat arises from fire. Like fire, gratitude is lovely to see;  
but when it warms others with generosity, that is when it becomes a true blessing."*

#### ***Special Music***

##### ***\*Unison Prayer of Dedication***

Kerri Mennenga

To you, the Giver of all Gifts: Remind us that it is not only what we have that we share as tithes and offerings, but our very selves that we share with our time, our talents, and our efforts that blesses our world. Help us to live by your Spirit for the common good of all humanity and creation. Teach us to see ourselves as bearers of the greatest gift you give to us all – the gift of loving one another and all your creatures great and small. With thankful hearts for having enough to give, we offer these tokens of our generosity to assist creating a world like you would have us to build. With joyful spirits we look forward to what giving we may yet do to bring about blessings for those we know, and those we do not. Inspire us to use all of our gifts for your service to a world that you love, and may we in our giving encourage others to share their gifts as well that together we may create more harmonious and loving relationships with one another through your Spirit. Blessings may we give; blessings may we be.

##### **\*Encouragement for the Journey**

God created you with gifts to share.  
Go into the world to share the gifts of you.  
Not everyone may affirm your gifts, and not everyone will see them in you.  
But God sees what others cannot,  
and asks you to cultivate, nurture, and share your gifts --  
near and far, to a world in which you are a part.  
We are one body, all of us on this planet.  
Share your gifts freely, joyfully, and abundantly  
that you may do your part to bless the common good.  
Be the gift you wish you had received.  
Be the gift of love.

## The Light of Love Goes into the World

*Love's light is not extinguished from our worship, but is transferred from the flame of the candles to the passion in our hearts that we may go forth to let the light of love shine through us as we go to serve in the world!*

### WE GO FORTH AS PEACEMAKERS TO CREATE JUSTICE FOR ALL

*Our worship is fulfilled, and our purpose is confirmed,  
through our service as God's stewards to the world and all creation.  
Use the blessings God has given you as you share  
the joy in your heart, the wisdom in your mind,  
the love in your spirit, and the peace in your soul.*

*Thank you for sharing sacred fellowship with us.*

First Congregational UCC is an inclusive church, embracing diversity in our congregation and community, and affirming the dignity and worth of every person. We are a community of faith that celebrates God's presence through shared stories and experiences of sacred meaning on Sundays, and through the nurturing of divine values and virtues manifested in active practices in our daily lives. We welcome all persons into the full life and ministry of the church, regardless of race, ethnic background, gender/sexual identity, sexual orientation, physical or cognitive capabilities, nationality/citizenship, or circumstance of life. We emphasize peace and nonviolence in all our relationships, personally and collectively, because we see the sacred worth of every person throughout this good earth. We are a Progressive Christian family of faith. We invite you to hear our experiences of the divine even as we are curious in learning about your own spiritual journey. We hope our values may intersect as together we strive to make our corner of the world a better place. Get to know us! We'd like to get to know you!

*The liturgies for this morning's worship, along with the Song of Dedication,  
were written by Rev. Bret S. Myers except where otherwise noted.*

#### Questions?

Call 319-234-8927 or email us at  
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*(Messages will be checked periodically)*

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#### Here are ways you can stay in touch:

\*Check for updates from Church Staff via email.

\*Facebook: First Congregational UCC Waterloo, Iowa (@FirstCongregationalUCCWaterlooIowa)

\*The FCUCC website: [www.firstcongucc.org](http://www.firstcongucc.org)

\*Our Youtube Channel: FCUCC Waterloo

\*And of course by reading The Tidings!

*Please make an appointment with Rev. Myers if you would like to meet with the pastor.  
You may email him at [revbmyers@yahoo.com](mailto:revbmyers@yahoo.com), or call/text his cell at 608-370-9472.  
Video talking is also available via Skype or Zoom.*

## ***Nourishment for the Journey***

The “Love Chapter” of the Bible, I Corinthians 13, is often spoken of philosophically or poetically apart from its original context. Because of its lilting rhetoric and poetic prose, we can gain much understanding about love despite not knowing the context of why this section was included in Paul’s much larger letter to the church at Corinth. Yet, still more is to be gained when we know why he was writing it.

The letter deals with a number of problems and issues facing this newly found congregation in Greece. Adjusting to a new value system and lifestyle, after hearing and cognitively accepting Paul’s message about Christ Jesus, is proving quite challenging. There are not only doctrinal differences and arguments arising, but more importantly ones which affect how they relate to one another. Old ways and thought patterns are proving hard to overcome, and Paul writes this lengthy letter to address the many obstacles they have in overcoming their dissension.

He names and confronts the very real sinful behavior and divisions that they have while reminding them again and again of the unity of Spirit they are to have in Christ. His bringing up these issues is not to scold them, but is to remind and encourage them that they are called to a more noble life than what they have been revealing.

Paul speaks about God’s wisdom being above human wisdom, and how this wisdom will lead them to different kinds of behaviors than they are displaying to one another, and especially to those leading them. He lists a host of specific concerns he has about them in the early chapters, and by the time he gets to the middle chapters, he has identified a general theme that he believes is causing all of this dysfunction.

Their basic malaise is one of some thinking they are superior to others, some thinking they are inferior, and perhaps the majority of them trying to figure out where they fit in this vying for control and power in the congregation. In chapter 8, he addresses the matter of some believing they have superior knowledge which grants them special privileges in the community of the faithful. Paul does not necessarily disagree with this statement so much as the attitude in which is constitutive of it. Whenever people feel superior, they treat others as inferior – and this tears down the Spirit of Christ that they are to be building amongst themselves.

Freedom of conscience is addressed in chapter 9, but this freedom has again turned into an attitude of superiority over others in the community rather than as an instrument to help train weaker members to better understand the gospel of Christ. Their attitudes are proving to be stumbling blocks to people who do not have the same understanding; and Paul wants them to see that they are to work out their faith together as a community rather than adopting a more individualistic model of everyone doing their own thing. With freedoms come responsibilities, as he attests in chapter 10. He makes mention of how these have affected the way they do worship in chapter 11, and then turns to how even their varying gifts, things that should be celebrated by all, are a source of contention in chapter 12.

All this prepares us for what Paul deals with in chapter 13, the preeminency of love over all other gifts. He believes this not only philosophically and theologically speaking, but he also believes it will be the source of solving all these myriad of problems they are having in their church. Their problems, while seeming like independent issues, are really the manifestation of a lack of love on their part for one another. And so Paul attempts to get them back on track in their spiritual journey by telling them about what love does and doesn’t do, in hopes they will learn to act accordingly.

The matters he speaks of relate to specific problems in the church at Corinth. Speaking in tongues (i.e., in non-native languages) is seen as an expression of the spirit being present with those who so speak – whether or not it can be interpreted or translated. Paul sees this as useless, even annoying, if the words are indiscernible. If no one is edified by the words, then praise of the speaker is vainglory.

There are other gifts, such as prophecy, knowledge, and faith, that Paul reveres higher than tongues; for they at least help others to be edified spiritually and ethically. But even these can be expounded upon with an incorrect motive. And the motive matters.

The motive is to be love. Preaching prophecy, teaching knowledge, and manifesting faith are all important and helpful to the common good; but only when they are done out of a Spirit of love and for the sake of building up that Spirit of love in the community are they done with the correct motive – the same motive in which God seeks to bless us.

In a congregation where people are thinking they are something special because of the special gifts that they have, Paul reminds them that they would be nothing without love. All the other gifts matter only insofar as they promote and reveal love between one another.

Some of the people have exhibited actions and practices that make it appear that they are filled with the Spirit, such as giving away all of their possessions, and handing over the labors of their bodies for the cause of serving the wider community. But Paul recognizes that some of these have done so in order to be boastful and to prove to everyone how good they are. The correct motive is to do it out of a genuine love ‘for’ others, instead of a love ‘of’ gaining esteem from others. An incorrect or selfish motive can corrupt an otherwise praiseworthy action.

Paul then lists the characteristics of love, and also lists what does not characterize love. He does this in order that they can see their own behaviors in the context of a love done out of the right set of motives. In each statement he makes about love, we can imply the opposite truth as well. So if love is patient and kind, it must also not be impatient and unkind. If love is not envious, arrogant, boastful, or rude, then it must also be congratulatory, unconceited, humble, and respectful. If love does not insist on its own way (that is, the way of the person who supposedly loves), then it will instead act for the sake of the greater good or common good. (Notice that this means that love will not act in a way that is contrary to love itself, but will simply not act in the sole interest of the individual who is to be loving). Likewise, if love is not irritable or resentful, then it must be amicable and affable.

Apparently, some of the Corinthians had rejoiced in wrongdoing, perhaps some doing something negative towards one who was disliked. This is not consistent with love, for love never laughs about or relishes wrongdoing – no matter who it is done to, or what the rationale might be for doing so. Wrong is wrong, and to try to justify it is a harm to love itself. Love rejoices in truth (which implies spiritual and ethical goodness for the ancient mind, and not simply facts or knowledge as many regard it in our culture). Love thus is a complete attitude and disposition, a Spirit, towards life.

When one acts with all of these right motives and virtues for the sake of love, we see the totality of the power of love in our lives. Love “*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things;*” not in a superficial or unwitting way, but in a way that will prosper love itself. Love itself is the gauge by which we are to judge all that we perceive, think, feel, say, and do. One who acts out of love will bear anything in order to advance the cause of love. One who acts out of love will believe anything that promotes a better understanding of love. One who acts out of love will hope for all that will encourage us to go on loving. One who acts out of love will endure whatever hardships and trials that come one’s way for the sake of maintaining one’s integrity in being loving.

These things are true because love itself, though not the person who loves, will never come to an end. Love is eternal. And so when we connect ourselves to love, we connect ourselves to eternity. Love outlives us all; but in orienting our lives in accordance with love, we align our own spirit with the Spirit of Love that never ends. We are thereby granted immortality in spirit, though our bodies will die and decay. Again, what matters most in our lives is not even life itself, but rather the love that we live while we are alive – the love that connects us to God, to our ancestors, to our descendants, and all who are positively affected by the ripple effect of love manifested by our own lives.

Because love has always existed and always will, the lives we live now only give us a partial understanding of love and its importance in life. “We know only in part,” Paul reminds us. And so, for all of us, our attempts of trying to see ourselves as superior and others as inferior are confirmation that we don’t have enough love in our lives. If we had love as we are to live it each and every day, then we would be about the business of improving the lives of everyone; and not trying to make ourselves look better, or to have a better life, at the expense of the lives of others.

A life of love takes us out of the realm of self or ego, and into the community Paul calls the “body of Christ.” We are all members of this body of Christ, and we are each endowed with the capacity to love. None of us is denied this gift from God, for God intentionally created us with this image of love, the image of the divine, so that we might love one another. We all have other gifts that vary in type and degree, but the only gift that matters, the only gift that God gave to us all, is the greatest of all gifts: love itself.

In the world of Jesus and Paul, many argued about which virtues were primary among all of the virtues. There were different candidates as to which virtue really should be the governing virtue of our lives – the virtue by which all other virtues were to serve its ends. Hope and faith were among those vying for the position of being able to best influence all of the other virtues, for they could survive no matter what other people or empires might do to you or what circumstances might befall you.

Hope and faith may indeed abide forever. But for Paul, as for Jesus, love itself was the greatest of all of the virtues. It alone, by its very nature, was pure in motive and could not be used, in its truest form, agape, for ulterior purposes. It alone was unconditional, omnibenevolent, and omnibeneficent. All other virtues could be used for different ends other than love, but love was viewed as self-creating, self-perpetuating, self-emptying, and self-giving as a virtue dedicated to being other-regarding. And those were the characteristics of what was regarded as divine. It is why among all of the virtues we could use to characterize God, the one that we most claim is that, ‘God is love.’

Faith, hope, and love all abide; but greatest of these is love -- the one that best describes the very essence of God; and who we, too, are to be.

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/25-26/2022*