

“The Key Ingredient”

“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

My maternal grandmother, Johanna Yunker, was by all accounts a wonderful cook. By the time I came along, she had given up cooking, but the family remembered all the wonderful meals she prepared, how she always knew exactly what to add to a dish to make it extra special. She was also a cook who did not use written recipes, relying on experience and taste in preparing meals. Because she never wrote down her recipes, no one could replicate any of her dishes to the way she would prepare them. There were many other wonderful cooks in the family (my mother included), but they would always lament how they never got my grandmother to write down her recipes or to teach them how she was able to make every meal a wonderful experience. She seemed to have a sixth sense that guided her to include the key ingredient that was the secret to make an ordinary meal an extraordinary dining event.

In many situations, knowing the key ingredient can make all the difference. An artist may sense what need to be added to turn a painting into a masterpiece. A writer senses that including a plot twist at the end of a novel will completely transform the story. A musician goes back and rewrites a section of a song that transforms it into a classic. Knowing the key ingredient that needs to be added can make the critical difference that will have a lasting impact.

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is a letter written by the apostle to a church fraught with divisions and controversies that have placed its very existence and mission in peril. He had lived in Corinth for several months and has learned through a letter written to him after he has left about divisions in the church: *“For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.”* (1:11). The issues that are threatening the future of the Corinthian church include divisions centering on groups who follow various leaders; sexual immorality among church members; believers bringing lawsuits against one another; whether or not church members should eat meat that has been offered to pagan idols; and abuses in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Another major dispute centered on how people were using the spiritual gifts with which they had been blessed. While it was clear that such gifts were the *“manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”* (12:7), some members of the church believed that certain gifts were superior to others and that those who possessed these gifts were to be more highly regarded than

believers endowed with “lesser” gifts. In seeking to correct this misconception that threatens to further divide the church, Paul reminds them that as each member of the physical body plays an important role in the body’s health and well-being, so also is member of the body of Christ blessed with a gift that is vital to the church’s life and mission:

- “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ ... God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.” – 12:12, 24-26.

As surely as God has configured the members of the human body, so it is with the body of Christ, in which God has arranged that certain gifts may be assigned to certain persons: “*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*” (12:27). No one person is endowed with all spiritual gifts, but the gifts are apportioned by God as the Spirit sees fit: “*All these are activated by the one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.*” (12:11). Rather than engaging in a hierarchy of spiritual gifts in order to place certain persons in a position of superiority over others, Paul urges each member of the Corinthian church to “*strive for the greater gifts,*” and then states that “*I will show you a still more excellent way*” (12:31), the key ingredient through which all spiritual gifts become the means through which the body of Christ accomplishes its full potential:

- “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.” – 13:1-3.

1 Corinthians 13 is one of the best-known passages of the Bible. It is frequent read at weddings and held up as an example of the qualities of love that are a source of strength and joy in human relationships. While it is appropriate to hold up these examples of love as we celebrate holy matrimony, Paul’s teaching focuses on love whose origin is with God, a love distinguished from human love by the specific word *agape*, a love that is unmotivated, unconditional, and limitless; it is the divine love that is celebrated in the book of Lamentations as a source of hope: “*The steadfast*

love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” (Lamentations 3:22-23). *Agape* is a love that starts with God, who needs nothing from creatures but by love brings them into being and enables them. In particular, Paul’s notion of love is based on the self-giving of Christ, who loved us not because we were good but loved us even while we were still sinners: “*But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*” (Romans 5:8). Love is described by Paul as the incomparably higher way; love is greater even than all conceivable “gifts” which in the thought of Christians in the first century represented the highest possibilities open to its members who possessed such gifts.

- “Love is greatest, not as a value and virtue in itself, but as a coordinate of faith, based on God’s past action, and hope, directed toward his future ... No one is excluded from it; it is therefore greater than the gifts of the Spirit which are bestowed on some but withheld from others.” – Gunther Bornkamm.

1 Corinthians 13 is an *encomium* on love, a well-established rhetorical device for praising an individual or a virtue. Typically, *encomia* praise in two ways: by reference to actions as a clue to character, and by comparison and contrast with other virtues or other praiseworthy persons. Usually, *encomia* open with a prologue and close with an appeal for emulation. Paul’s teaching on love meets all these criteria. For Paul, love is the *sine qua non* (essential condition) of the faithful life. Without love, all gifts, powers, and actions come to naught. Paul presents himself in the first three verses of this chapter as a negative exemplar, as one who, though very gifted, if lacking love, would be of no worth and no value. Extraordinary gifts, grand abilities and skills, and extravagant actions are all emptied of any worth without love:

- “No matter how extravagant the accomplishment, power or action, when love is missing the exercise in question become vain, selfish, fruitless, and individualistic; it does not even serve to accomplish its self-vaunted end.” – J. Paul Sampley.

Love is a way of life for Paul. Without love there can be no depth perception of God, who is love; so, persons cannot understand each other in relation to God and the universe without love. Spiritual gifts are a formidable array of power, but without love they are nothing. Their motivation, orientation, and purpose are ineffectual unless love gives them God’s dimension.

- “Love stubbornly adheres to the conviction that life has purpose and meaning, that despite appearances God’s purpose will be accomplished, and that he is using his people as part of his great plan for humanity ... The gift of love is grounded in God’s own love.” – William Orr and James Walther.

In the most famous section of this chapter, Paul lays out love’s credentials both positively, with regard for what love does and how it operates, and negatively, with regard to what it avoids and does not do. Paul does not romanticize love with abstract language; rather, love is a concrete action that comes with all action verbs. Seven of the fifteen action verbs in this paragraph have to do with what love must do: “*Love is patient; love is kind ... [love] rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*” (13:4, 6-7). The remaining eight actions verbs describe what love should not do: “*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 ...*” (13:4-6a). Paul’s repeated use of “all things” (*panta*) emphasizes love’s all-encompassing scope. Love is never held alone in oneself; love always involves another; love always links oneself to another. “*Love is a two-way street that provides a context of mutuality, understanding, and relatedness between each person and others, between God and believers, and between believers and believers.*” (Sampley). Faith, right relationship with God, is the basis on which one has hope regarding the future because, through faith, one knows God’s redemption in the present and can hope for the completion of God’s work that God has already begun in the present.

- “If the Corinthians are led by the Spirit and informed by the Lord, they can follow examples of love as shown by Christ and participate in his work, rejoicing in the truth. Furthermore, the Spirit helps them to bear all things, to believe all things, to hope in all things, and to endure all things. At the same time, love means that they should not envy, not boast, not be arrogant or rude, not seek their own way, not be irritable, not be resentful, and not rejoice in wrongdoing.” – Yung Suk Kim.

Love that is defined as *agape* is distinct from all human experiences and expressions of love because “*love never ends.*” (13:8). Love’s being and existing is tied to God’s very self. Love comes from God who chose the weak and foolish (1 Corinthians 1:18-25); love is expressed in God who “*so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life*” (John 3:16). Those who have been redeemed through God’s love in Jesus Christ are

called to follow the example of Christ's love: "*We love because [God] first loved us.*" (1 John 4:19).

- "Given worth (justified, sanctified) by Christ's *agape*, we become the channel of passing that love on to others whom we love, not evaluating their goodness and without motivation: 'Love each other as I have loved you' (John 15:12)." – Raymond Brown.

While *agape* never ends because it is rooted in God's eternal nature, everything else that the Corinthians are experiencing will one day come to an end: "*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.*" (13:8). Paul points to a time in the future when all that has been promised will be fulfilled, the time when "*the complete comes [and] the partial will come to an end.*" (13:10). Paul speaks of his own experience of transformation toward maturity when he states that "*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.*" (13:11). Paul may be referring to his former time as a Pharisee before receiving his call from God, or he may be referring to the former times during his early career as an apostle. Paul uses his own experience of maturity in faith to encourage his readers to "*grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.*" (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Paul then switches from a personal example to the experience of all Christians at the present time: "*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.*" (13:12). The knowledge yet to come, at the end of the ages, so far surpasses present knowledge as to put present knowledge in perspective. While all has not yet been revealed to us, because of our certainty that we are God's beloved children we live in the blessed assurance that all that God has promised will be revealed to us in the fullness of time:

- "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure." – 1 John 3:2-3.

Paul concludes his *encomium* on love with the proclamation that “*now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*” (13:13). Faith, hope, and love are at the heart of the Christian life. Faith, the right relationship with God, makes love possible (“... *the only thing that counts is faith working through love*” – Galatians 5:6), so love presupposes faith. Hope, a conviction and yearning lodge in the heart of the individual, clearly ends when that for which one hopes is finally achieved. By contrast love, grounded in God and an eternal characteristic of God’s commitment toward all creatures, is the one disposition that believers share most fully with God – and that love is eternal. Faith, hope, and love endure; spiritual gifts, no matter how powerful or spectacular they may be, are finite, given to person who employ them for a limited period of time within the community. “*Love is the matrix for the life of faith; God’s love for people become the force that enables them to love others.*” (Sampley).

This is the time of year that congregations are preparing reports for their annual meetings, reviewing events and ministries of the past year and looking toward the future into which God has called us as “*the church which is the body of Christ.*” It is a reminder that the church is truly “*the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered in accordance with the Gospel*” (Augsburg Confession), and that the work of the church involves many persons who share their gifts and talents in order to build up the church and to allow it to accomplish its mission. As we give thanks for all members of this congregations who have shared the gifts God has given to them in our life together, we are reminded of Paul’s teachings that even the greatest of these gifts are useless unless the key ingredient in the life of Christ’s church is present and active among us: the gift of God’s love that always seek what is best for others, always builds up, always seeks to embody the love of God that is ours in Jesus Christ.

- “Community is the place where people give to one another. We are not God, but we can be mediators (in a limited way) of the unlimited love of God. Community is the place of joy and celebration where we can say to one another, ‘Be of good cheer: the Lord has overcome the world, the Lord has overcome the evil one. Do not be afraid’ ... Community is the place from which we speak the Good News to the world: ‘Don’t be afraid. Look, it has already happened. Christ is risen.’” – Henri Nouwen.

My grandmother was a great cook; but because she did not write down or share her recipes, no one can continue to enjoy her wonderful meals. But because we know that the key ingredient in the life of the church is love – the *agape* that is ours in our

Lord Jesus Christ – we can continue to work begun by our Lord; we can continue to use the gifts with which God has entrusted to us so that all may see the light of Christ through us, that all may know that they are beloved children of God, and that we may continue to “*proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (1 Peter 2:9).

The key ingredient is love!

Amen.