

"A More Perfect Way"  
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr  
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – January 30, 2022

PLEASE READ:  
Jeremiah 1:4-10  
I Corinthians 13:1-13

Did you see earlier this month, art historian Christopher Wright discovered that a painting he bought for £65 back in 1970 is in fact the work of Flemish master Sir Anthony van Dyck. Some dealers estimate it will fetch a seven-figure sum if put up for auction. Wright went on to admit, "I took no notice of it, in a strange way. The syndrome is the cobbler's children are the worst shod. So, the art historian's collection is the least looked at."<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if we sometimes don't have the same problem in the church. We are often oblivious to some of the most beautiful passages ever written... Today we may try to recover the extraordinary value of a Scripture text that's been used quite often at weddings and in many marriage counseling sessions. The whole passage of I Corinthians chapter 13, is wonderful, but I find verse 7 most perplexing, "Love bears all things, hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." So, let's focus here...

First of all, there are all kinds of love, but the Christian vision of love here (translated from the word *agape*) is fundamentally an act of the will. What Paul describes is a gift from the empowerment of God's Spirit.

Love is the culmination of God's work in our lives and this unique quality of Christian love is easily recognized in the world. I didn't say it was very *common* in the world - I said it is easily recognized, principally because it is so *uncommon*. Our world, so polarized and belligerent, so pernicious and broken, desperately needs to experience Christ's love, this divine love, all loves excelling. This self-giving, other-centered love is a gift of the Spirit. That is why this chapter 13 is really a conclusion to Paul's teaching on the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit in chapter 12. The Spirit gives to each one a gift for ministry to be shared with others. The Spirit works to draw the Body of Christ together as One Body and One Spirit - the church. But the direction of the Spirit is always from within working out toward the world. And it is this love which our world so desperately needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Dalya Alberge, "Art historian discovers that £65 painting on his wall is work of Flemish master," (The Guardian, January 9, 2022), referenced on-line January 26, 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/jan/09/art-historian-discovers-that-65-painting-on-his-wall-is-work-of-flemish-master>.

You will notice that for Paul love is the ultimate medium of ministry. The specific acts of ministry, such as speaking eloquently, or prophesying, having wisdom, understanding, or faith or generous giving, even giving up oneself are meaningless and worthless if they are not shared in love.

This is fundamental to our faith, but we often forget to love one another. And this love is practiced in very specific ways that Paul lists. I think we can apply Paul's description to our personal relationships, whether they be at home, or in the office or here at church. "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right." We are given here a working definition of love - an ideal toward which we can strive. Our couples Bible study looked at this text the other night, and I invited them to replace their name with the word love. It's a lifetime mission statement. "Scott is patient and kind..." Try putting your name in...

I'm always quick to confess that we can't realize this love by ourselves, but through the gift of God's Spirit at work in us. Indeed, this love is a gift from God...

So, let's come back to the rather mysterious assertion that "love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends..." What does that mean?

First, love *bears* all things. The meaning seems simple enough on the surface: with love, we can brave any battle, survive any struggle, find some triumph in any tragedy, some comfort in anything that confuses us initially, some peace and promise in life that seems at times to be all too perplexing and problematic. Love, we sometimes, say, binds all wounds; it heals all heartaches; love bears all things.

As I look at this phrase, I find Paul speaking to how we confront our difficulties, and also as to how we respond to the difficulties of others. Let me ask you, have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were so consumed by anger or resentment toward another that you said to your- self, "I can't bear to be around that person anymore. I just can't bear it!

That puts a new twist on this teaching, doesn't it? Love bears all people; love links together all of our lives in compassion - so much so that if we are ever truly to become a family of faith, then we are bound by love to work through our differences and recognize our common devotion to Christ.

There's an old Jewish folktale, about Abraham and Sarah. As the story goes, Abraham's tent was always open to strangers because of his strong belief in hospitality and in befriending those who wearily traveled the desert sands. On one particular occasion, an old man happened by, looking for a place to rest from the heat of the midday sun and perhaps impose upon his hosts for a meal. Both Abraham and Sarah were only too willing to oblige and invited the elderly man into their tent.

But over the course of supper and throughout their ensuing discussion, it soon became painfully evident that neither Abraham nor Sarah had much in common with this old man. Not only did they disagree on matters of morals and ethics, they did not even share the most basic of beliefs. Finally, Abraham could take it no longer. "Out of my tent," he shouted. "I will have no more to do with a man like you. I can't even bear your presence, and I have wasted enough of my hospitality already!"

Before the old man was out of sight, though, Abraham heard the voice of the Lord calling out his name.

"Speak, Lord, your servant hears you," Abraham answered.

"For eighty years, I have protected and cared for that old man you just threw out of your tent," the Lord said. "I have continued to claim him as one of my own even though he does not yet claim me. I have waited patiently, for he too is one of my children. Ah, Abraham, if I could bear with him all these years, could you not bear with him for just one hour?"

And the great patriarch fell silent, recognizing what he had done.

Love bears all people. Love cares for all people because all people are of God. There is no one who is not a potential member of God's family, no one who the Lord does not seek out to save and redeem.

Love *believes* all things. What exactly does that mean? Well, let us first clarify what it does not mean. It does not mean that when one lives a life of love one suddenly becomes naive and gullible and ready to swallow any old thing that comes floating along hook, line, and sinker. We do not live in a fact-free world. Sadly, we live in a world where unfortunately not everything is believable, and not everyone can or ought to be trusted.

Strangely, I think we have a clue from another passage of Paul's in Romans, "We know that in all things God works for good to those who love God and are called

according to his purposes." Love is that all-abiding trust not in our circumstances, but in God; Love is that confident and sure sense that God is constantly and continually at work in this world. That's what is at the very heart of the words "Love believes all things." Love means continually placing our faith in and turning to God in times of hardship and times of joy. Love never stops believing that we are part of God's plan, all part of God's redemptive purpose and promise in the world.

That is what love believes, and it is able to believe it because God so loved us that God did not retaliate but forgives us even when we attack and try to kill God. In Christ, God proved the promise.

Love *hopes* all things. - or perhaps better translated, "in all things love is able to find some hope." I have laughed at the sarcastic website posters, found on despair.com. There's an image of a sunken ship with the caption, "Sometimes the purpose of your life is simply to serve as a warning to others." Or my other favorite is that famous photo of a Grizzly bear about ready to bite a salmon jumping up the falls. The caption on that poster is "Sometime the journey of a thousand miles ends very badly." There are times, indeed, when the outcomes of life seem to leave little room for hope.

But that is where love opens us up to letting go of our demands, of our desired results, and yielding to the mystery of life and death, to trust again in the sovereignty of God in all things.

The past two years have been trying, to say the least. We've been hoping this pandemic will be over and it just keeps on going. And we've had to acknowledge that with all of our technology and resources, we simply can't control some things. And it's been hard, and there have been profound losses, some because of the virus and some compounded by the virus.

The latin root for "hope" is the same root for our English word prosper. I find that intriguing. Love is going to look for a way to prosper in any situation. It's going to try and fail sometimes, but never stop looking for ways for life to flourish. Where there are obstacles and challenges, love looks for opportunities! Where there are problems, love looks for possibilities! Where there are worries, love looks for windows of light and of new life! Love hopes all things, because in love, God is at work in our lives. And where God is at work, there is always hope!

Finally, "love *endures* all things." What is most intriguing about this phrase for me is the word Paul chooses. In the Greek, the word is *hupomone*. This word has always been special to me because one of my professors used to say this to me. Diogenes

Allen used to tell me when I looked down or overworked at Seminary, "*Hupomone*, Scott!"

This word of encouragement means literally to endure, but it is a special word in the New Testament, because for Christians our endurance is always linked to our orientation of Christ's ultimate victory over the world. *Hupomone* is code to remind us that the Lord is with us. Love endures all things because it is born out of a knowledge that we are totally secure in Christ. No matter how dangerous the immediate story line of our lives may be, we know the conclusion is triumphant. No matter how severe our shortcomings, no matter how frustrating our failures, no matter how disappointing and discouraging our defeats may be, God's love will comfort and carry us, protect and provide for us, heal and make us whole again.

That's why Paul says love is the more perfect way. Love is a lifestyle, it's a road that we walk, it's the map toward new life that we and our world so desperately needs. It begins with receiving God's love shown to us in Christ, the one who loves us with a perfect love.

Just as Christopher Wright rediscovered the value of the Van Dyck right under his nose, so may we rediscover the value of God's love as defined in I Corinthians 13. When we experience and receive Christ's love in our own lives, we then can begin to share Christ's love with those around us. It is a far more perfect way, my friends, in the Spirit, in the Church, and in the World ... for the love of God **bears** all things, **believes** all things, **hopes** all things, **endures** all things. Surely this love never ends.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*