

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In 1984 . . .

- it was her first and only #1 song on the Billboard Hot 100
- it sold 1.5 million copies worldwide
- it was the second biggest single of the year, behind “When Doves Cry” by Prince
- it earned three Grammys: Record of the Year, Song of the Year, and Best Female Pop Performer

The song was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2012.

In 1993, “What’s Love Got to Do with It” was the title of the biographical film about the song’s singer, Tina Turner. You may not remember all of the lyrics to the song, but perhaps the chorus is familiar:

*Oh-oh-oh, what’s love go to do, got to do with it?
What’s love, but a second-hand emotion?
What’s love got to do, go to do with it?
Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?*

You will really have to use your imagination for this one! But imagine a duet between Tina Turner and the Apostle Paul as they debate the question, “What’s love got to do with it?”

Tina: Paul, what’s love got to do, got to do with it?

Paul: Now, Tina, faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Tina: But Paul, what’s love, but a second-hand emotion?

Paul: Tina, I will show you a still more excellent way. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the right. (1 Corinthians 12:31; 13:4-6)

Tina: Paul, I have to ask again, what’s love got to do, got to do with it?

Paul: You see, Tina, if I do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I do not have love, I am nothing. If I do not have love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

Tina: Sounds great, Paul, but who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?

Paul: Tina, believe me, love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. The greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:7-8, 13)

Here we are – the day before Valentine’s Day and love is in the air! Red roses and boxes of chocolates and candlelight dinners and lacy Valentine cards and lots of red and pink. But that’s not the kind of love Paul writes about. When he wrote to the Corinthian Christians, Paul had at least four different words for love he could choose from:

Philia, the love between friends. That’s where we get our words philanthropy and Philadelphia and my name, Philip.

Storge, the love of family, such as between parent and child, siblings, cousins, etc. We find a form of that word in Romans 12:10, where Paul encourages the Christians to “love one another with mutual affection.”

Eros, the sense of being in love; romantic love; sensual love. Eros was the Greek god of love and sex. On Valentine’s Day, we know him better by his Roman name, Cupid. Eros is where we get the word erotic. The word is not used in the New Testament.

Then there is *agape*, which is unconditional love or, better yet, love in action. Since *agape* is best understood as love that does something, love that is proactive, love that looks out for the best interest of the other person, why not use the best example found in the Bible? John 3:16 – “For God so loved (*agape*) the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” And in something like a commentary on John 3:16, Paul tells us how absolutely amazing God’s *agape love* for us and for the world really is: “But God proves his love (*agape*) for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

That’s the kind of love Jesus was talking about when he told his disciples (and us), “I give you a new commandment, that you love (*agape*) one another. Just as I have loved (*agape*) you, you also should love (*agape*) one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love (*agape*) one another.” (John 13:34-35) That’s what we sang about at the close of worship last Sunday:

*We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand
And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land.
We will work with each other, we will work side by side
And we'll guard human dignity and save human pride
and they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

I read this week about a minister from the United States who visited some Christians in Cuba. Here’s how he described the visit: “I was privileged to travel to Cuba to visit a tiny sister denomination, the Christian Reformed Church of Cuba. Under Castro’s nose, this little band of Christians was thriving. In fact, they had just built a beautiful new church building. As Rev. Erilio Martinez showed us through this yellow stucco, white tiled building, we asked if this building would attract people to Christ. He said, ‘No. It might get them here once or twice. But they won’t come to Christ because of this building.’ I asked if the preaching of Christ would do it. He said, ‘No, even that won’t do it. They won’t believe us unless we show them love.’ Then I thought of the way this little group of poor Christians loved their community. They had

an outsized impact on their town, because they fed the poor, gave medicine to the clinic, visited the sick, helped educate the children, and did countless small acts of kindness to non-Christians. How can we show Christ to the world? ‘They won’t believe us, unless we show them love.’ A church loving the world the way Christ loved the church. Perhaps that’s why Paul opens 1 Corinthians 13 with these words, ‘I will show you a more excellent way.’”¹

That’s exactly why Paul begins 1 Corinthians 13 the way he does. What if we tailor Paul’s words to our own congregation? If we have the most beautiful music in Wallace, the best musicians and choirs, but do not have love, they are a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal! And if we devote ourselves to the study of God’s Word so as to learn as much as we can about the Bible, but do not have love, we are nothing. If we stock the Helping Hands Food Pantry shelves with food and fill up the Fellowship Hall with presents for the St. Nicholas Project and put our money in the offering plate to support all kinds of ministries, but do not have love, we gain nothing. But if we do all of these things – and so much more – with love/*agape*, the way God has loved us in Jesus Christ, then we will come to understand what love’s got to do with it. More important than that, we’ll show our community and this world what love’s got to do with it.

Chances are you usually hear 1 Corinthians 13 read at weddings. That’s fine and good. Paul’s description of *agape* love is good guidance for a bride and groom beginning their married life. But Paul wasn’t writing about or talking about married love or romantic love or those special feelings you get when you open the card that says “Be my Valentine!” No, Paul wrote about the kind of love that holds the community of faith together and guides each and all of us in how we use our gifts for the common good. Here’s how Frederick Buechner describes Paul’s purpose in 1 Corinthians 13: “Not even in the Gospels is there a more familiar passage than the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. ‘Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels . . . when I was a child, I spake as a child . . . through a glass darkly. . .’ (King James Version) Words as familiar as these are like coins worn smooth with long handling. Paul has been speaking about spiritual gifts – prophecy, tongues, healing, miracles, and so on – and making the point that they should not be the cause of still further divisiveness, people gifted one way disparaging people gifted another. He sees all Christians as parts of Christ’s body and each part in its own way as necessary as every other. ‘The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you.”’ Each gift is to be cherished. ‘But,’ he says then, ‘earnestly desire the higher gifts’ (12:21, 31) and at that point sets off into what turned out to be perhaps the most memorable words he ever wrote

“The highest gift of all is *agape*, he says. Without it even faith, almsgiving, martyrdom are mere busyness and even great wisdom doesn’t amount to a hill of beans. The translators of the King James Version render the Greek word as ‘charity,’ which in the seventeenth-century usage was a happy choice – charity as the beneficence of the rich to the poor, the lucky to the unlucky, the powerful to the weak, the lovely to the unlovely. But since to our age the word all too often suggests a cheerless and demeaning handout, modern translators have usually rendered it as

'love.' But *agape* love is not to be confused with *eros* love. That is what Paul is at such pains to make clear here."²

One day, a scribe asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered him, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall *agape* the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall *agape* your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than this." (Mark 12:28-34) That's what love's got to do with it!

In 386 A.D., St. Jerome, who is considered to be the greatest biblical scholar of his time, wrote a set of commentaries on the letters of the apostle Paul. His commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians is ranked as his crowning achievement. Galatians 6:10 says, "So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith." In his reflections on the meaning of that verse, Jerome tells a famous story about the apostle John when he was an extremely old man in Ephesus. Because he was so weak, he used to be carried into the meeting of the congregation in the arms of his disciples. At the end of the meeting, his disciples would help John to his feet so he could speak. Week in and week out, all John would say was, "Little children, let us love one another." After a while, his disciples got tired of hearing the same thing every week, so they asked him why he always said the same thing. John replied, "Because it is the Lord's commandment, and if this only is done, it is enough."³

Here's another reflection on 1 Corinthians 13 from another place in the New Testament. These verses are full of *agape*: "We love because God first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." (1 John 4:19-21)

I hope that before we do anything as Christians and, especially, as a congregation, we will ask ourselves, "What's love got to do with it?" Because for the apostle Paul and, for that matter, the entire New Testament, love's got everything to do with it.

Let us pray: God of faith, hope, and love, shape us into faithful hopeful people and fill us with your love that passes all understanding. We pray this together in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOTES

¹Stan Mast, "Sermon Commentary for Sunday, January 31, 2016 – 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 Commentary," at www.cepreaching.org.

²Frederick Buechner, a passage from his sermon called "Paul Sends His Love," first published in *The Clown in the Belfry* and later in *Secrets in the Dark*.

³This story can be found in numerous resources. This is a reworking of Dr. Ralph F. Wilson, *Stories about John from the Church Fathers*, "Love One Another," at www.jesuswalk.com.