

CALLED TO LOVE

1 Corinthians 13:1-13
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Sarah and Dan were just entering their retirement years together. It had been decades since they'd spent time together, just the two of them, but they were enjoying the adventure. Early on in their marriage, when Sarah was getting her MBA, it had been obvious that Sarah would be the career person. Dan enjoyed his part-time work as an engineering consultant so he could be the stay-at-home dad for their three beautiful daughters. Naturally, Dan had always been closer to the kids and Sarah immersed in her work, and they liked it that way. But now the kids were raised, the first grandchild had arrived, and Sarah was happy to leave corporate management behind so they could enjoy time together again. They'd just taken up sailing, and they were planning their first long voyage when they got the news that Dan was dying of cancer. Everything changed. Now instead of studying ocean charts and navigation systems, Dan and Sarah immersed themselves in medical knowledge, learning as much as they could to maximize whatever time Dan had left. The kids came home to help, because they knew that Sarah was not a natural-born caregiver. They weren't sure Mom was up to the task of caring for Dad, so they all agreed they would take turns helping. Dan held on for almost two years longer than the doctors had predicted, but the time came when he finally said, "No more hospitals. Can I go home to enjoy my last days?" Sarah and the girls agreed, and so they moved Dan home with the help of hospice. Hospice recommended a round-the-clock caregiver. But Sarah said, "No, I'm ready to be the caregiver. I can hire someone to sleep over each night so I'm rested, but I'll take the days. You kids get to come and laugh and love and talk with your dad." And so, they did, enjoying

whatever family time was left with their beloved dad. In those last few weeks, it was Sarah who bathed him, clothed him, and changed his diapers. On that last day, she held his hand until he slipped to the other side and they said their last good-bye. As Sarah looks back on those days, she tells me they were the most meaningful days of her life and her marriage. “They reminded me of the early days of motherhood. All those days on maternity leave when I held each newborn baby, nursed her, changed her diapers, and held her close to comfort her when she cried. I had the beautiful gift of bringing three people into the world, and I had the beautiful gift of helping one person leave this world. What a great thing that the four most precious people in my lives have allowed me into that sacred space.” If you knew Sarah, you would know that caring for Dan when he lay dying was not anything anyone would have expected of her, and we certainly would not have expected her to find it so life-giving and so transformative. But her miraculous ability to care for Dan and embrace it as gift arose from her deep, deep love of Dan, the type of love expressed in today’s scripture reading, an *agape* love that had grown and strengthened in their 40-year bond of their marriage.

This passage from 1 Corinthians is often called the “love chapter” and frequently read at weddings. But it’s not a passage about romantic love or *eros*, as the Greeks call it. This passage is about *agape*. *Agape* love--the unconditional love that Christ has for the Church, the steadfast love that God has for humanity--is the love that Paul calls us to have for one another in the church. And even though a lot of my seminary friends think it’s silly that wedding couples pick a passage about Christ’s love for the church, *agape* love, so very different than romantic love or *eros*, it makes perfect sense to me. For *agape* love is what helps a marriage to survive the test of time. *Eros* love comes and goes; romance waxes and wanes. But *agape* remains.

In the church, our church friends come and go. Our preferences get fulfilled, or they get disappointed. Ministries we've dreamed of happen, or they don't. Our faith and trust in God may wax or wane. Our faith and trust in one another may falter or weaken, and then later reform as a stronger bond. Our abilities to fulfill our ministries come and go. Our willingness to live up to God's call ebbs and flows. But love remains. Even if we aren't holding onto that love, it is here. For Christ's love – *agape* - is at the very center of our being as a church. The Spirit's presence is the personification of this, for the Spirit is abiding presence of God's *agape* love.

Sarah found it possible to love and care for Dan in those last days, because their marriage had long expanded beyond *eros* love to embrace *agape* love. *Agape* love had gotten them through the many corporate moves that could have pulled a family apart, but instead brought them closer together. *Agape* love had gotten through those challenging years of raising teenagers and letting their young adult children spread their wings, bonding Dan and Sarah ever closer even when their young ones fell from the nest in difficult ways before finally soaring on to thriving adult lives. And in Dan's last days, *agape* love expanded yet again, having grown out of their strong *eros* love that had first brought them into married life together.

In the church, we also have two loves to get us through the best and worst of life together – *phileo* love and *agape* love. *Phileo* love is that love we have for friends, the love we have for those who've cared for us through thick and thin, for those we laugh with, worship with, and study with. *Phileo* love is strong in this church. I see it in Disciple groups, youth group, prayer partners, running partners, and close friends. But what binds the whole church together is not *phileo*, but *agape* love. This *agape* love transcends friendships, embracing even those people whom we barely know. The *agape* love expands beyond those we like best and embraces those

we like the least. This *agape* love transcends the fights we have with a good friend, and helps us to love them even when we're feuding. This *agape* love expands beyond a broken promise, a betrayal, or a denial, and helps us sit at table with these same friends who have betrayed, or denied or broken a promise.

This *agape* love is not easy. But it is here for us. Christ's love, ever present, always ready to bond us together and make us one. Friendships may come and go. Ministry dreams may live or die. Gifts and talents may wax or wane. But love remains. *Agape* remains, calling us ever deeper into love for one another, ever stronger in our commitment to our unity as sisters and brother with Christ in this church. Loving like this isn't easy. Try reading Verses 4-7 in first person, and imagine actually living the words. I am patient. Already, in the first verse, I'm tripped up. Try it this week, and embrace the challenge of embracing agape love, for this love can transform our church, can transform our lives, as it did for Sarah.

This *agape* love is not an easy lesson to remember, let alone live.

So, I'll leave you with an old Jewish parable to help us remember this lesson.

There was a big Catholic monastery that had fallen on very hard times. Formerly its many buildings had been filled with young monks and its big church filled with worshippers as the walls resounded with the singing of their chants. But the halls were empty now, and the sounds hollow. People no longer came there to be nourished by prayer. A handful of old monks shuffled through the empty corridors and sang quietly with heavy hearts.

On the edge of the monastery woods, a wise old rabbi had built a little hut for times of retreat and study. He would come there from time to time to fast and pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared the word would be passed from monk to monk: "The rabbi

walks in the woods.” And, for as long as he was there, the monks would feel sustained and uplifted by his prayerful presence.

One day the abbot who headed the monastery decided to visit the rabbi and ask for his wisdom. As he approached the hut, the rabbi stood in the doorway, his arms outstretched in welcome as if he had long been expecting the abbot. The two embraced like long-lost brothers, and the rabbi invited the abbot in.

“You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts,” the rabbi said. “I have a message for you, but you can only repeat it to the brothers once. After that, no one must ever say it out loud again.”

The rabbi looked into the old abbot’s eyes and said, “The Messiah is among you.”

The next morning, the abbot called his monks together. He told them he had received a message from the rabbi who walks in the woods, and that this message was never again to be spoken aloud. Then he looked at his brothers and said, “The rabbi said that the Messiah is amongst us.”

The monks were startled. “What could it mean?” they asked themselves. “Is Brother John the Messiah? Or Father Matthew? Am I the Messiah? What could this mean?”

They were all deeply puzzled by this message. But, as instructed, no one ever talked of it again.

Still, the monks began to treat one another with a very special reverence. There was a gentleness, a beautiful connection about them now, which was hard to describe but easy to notice. They lived with one another as people who had finally found something. They studied the scriptures and prayed together as though they were always looking for something. They sang as

if they believed in their songs. They prayed as if Jesus were right there with them. Occasionally, visitors stopped by and found themselves deeply moved by these monks. Word spread of the mysterious love that seemed to emanate from the monastery and its monks. Before long, people were coming from far and wide to worship at the church and hear the monks' beautiful singing. Young men arrived, asking once again to become part of the community, and the monastery grew strong and vital again. And even though the rabbi no longer walked in the woods, the old monks who had taken his message to heart still felt sustained by his prayerful presence.

The Messiah might be amongst us. The Spirit is with us. Let's turn to the Spirit to welcome that same prayerful presence in a time of silence together.