

Love is Like Frosting

1 Corinthians 13

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. Love is patient; love is kind; 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, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 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. 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

This morning, it's time for true confessions. Think back to when you were a kid. When you ate a cupcake, how did you do it? I pulled the top off the cupcake, then ate that part and couldn't care less about the unfrosted bottom that remained. Some kids were even more frosting-attentive than I was. My younger sister remembers licking off just the frosting, then handing off the cupcake to anyone who wanted it. She was only interested in the frosting. So time to confess. If you ever ate your baked goods as a kid by aiming just for the frosting, raise your hand. Go ahead; confession is good for the soul.

There's a good reason kids go for the frosting. For most kids, cupcakes are too big. Adults can take a nice big bite from the top of the cupcake to the bottom. But kids' mouths are too small. Since they already have to be creative, why not head straight for the frosting? But even kids know that too much frosting will give them a stomach ache.

With a sermon title "Love is Like Frosting," you may wonder where I'm going with this. Any five-year-old can tell you that frosting is the best part. In fact, several of them might say that all you need is frosting. The Fab Four wrote a song like that. Except instead of singing about frosting, they sang, "All you need is love... love is all you need." Actually, pretty much any love song ultimately boils down to that line. All you need is love. But just like frosting, we often think of those songs as kind of saccharine – just a little too sweet for a steady diet. Because the kind of

love those songs describe is the romantic feeling between two people. Even if they're not singing about romantic love, they're still generally speaking about love as a sentimental emotion. Love that's warm and fuzzy and makes us feel good. Love that will conquer evil and make everything okay. It's the kind of love in every Meg Ryan movie. In the first 15 minutes, you've figured out who she's going to fall in love with, and by the end of the movie, they live happily ever after.

I think the reason we have a million movies, and books, and songs that declare the triumph of love in our lives is because we want that to be the case. We want everyone to live happily ever after. But it turns out that the greater popular sentiment is that love isn't actually enough. Instead of the Beatles, think Sonny & Cher singing, "They say our love won't pay the rent." One TV sitcom character said, "Well, I could try to pay the phone bill with love, but I think it's a felony." I mean, look at Romeo and Juliet. They had love – but look where it got them!

You want real life instead of fiction? Catelynn and Tyler were high school sweethearts, still 16 years old when Catelynn got pregnant. They knew they weren't capable of being good parents or providers, so they decided to give up their baby for adoption. It was a huge struggle for them to make that choice, especially since they did not have support from their parents. Tyler's dad said, "All that baby needs is love." But Tyler, who was thinking about diapers and daycare, clothes and a crib, responded, "No, that's not all a baby needs." Keith Butler, a marriage counselor, encourages couples to be financially stable before planning a wedding. He writes,

You can be foolish about this if you want to, and you can also tell yourself that you love each other all you want. That won't change the fact that you can't eat love, and love won't keep you warm in the cold winter wind—you need a warm coat, dry shoes and a weather-tight home. You'd better find a job!

Sometimes love isn't enough.

In the movie *The Last Kiss*, Michael and his fiancée get into a huge fight. When Michael tries to make up with her, he ends up having a conversation with his potential father-in-law, Steven. Michael says, “I love her, Steven. I realize now I love her more than I will ever love anybody else.”

Steven replies, “Stop talking about love. Every idiot in the world says he loves somebody. It means nothing. What you feel only matters to you. It’s what you do to the people you say you love. That’s what matters. That’s the only thing that counts.”

I think Steven overstates his case here. He says love means nothing. Actions are all that matter. And that’s exactly what Paul is refuting in our Scripture reading this morning. Paul is writing this letter to a church full of people who have been arguing about whose spiritual gifts are greatest. The community has determined that some things are better than others, and thus, some people are better than others. If you go home and read chapter 12, 13, and the first part of 14, you’ll see Paul’s argument to the community.

First, he says, everyone has gifts. God gives spiritual gifts to everybody. No one is left out. Second, no gift is better or worse than another. All gifts are valuable, and as such, are valuable to the community. So third, we need to use our gifts for the good of the community. Can you teach? Preach? Organize? Lead? Then do it, Paul says. Just before chapter 13, Paul tells them that there’s something even better than sharing their gifts. And that thing is to do everything with love. After all, what good is it to be a prophet or to be generous if you do it without love? Paul says that these acts done without love are empty and useless.

Perhaps the most famous line of this chapter comes in the last verse. *And now faith, hope, love abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.* Paul says the greatest thing in the world is love. But he’s clearly not talking about love as a saccharine emotion. He’s talking about the

kind of love that motivates us to share our spiritual gifts. The kind of love that reaches out to act, to do something because of how it feels.

So in fact, Paul is offering us a balance between thinking that love is enough and thinking that love is only an impractical emotion. If love were enough, Paul wouldn't have to talk to this church about the importance of sharing their gifts. He wouldn't have to ask them to get involved and do their part. But if actions alone were enough, Paul wouldn't have written these great words about love. This chapter of the Bible is so well-known that many non-Christians can recite it. Because the words are familiar, we don't always get the full impact of what Paul was trying to say. So let me read part of this chapter from Eugene Peterson's translation *The Message*:

Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always "me first," doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end. Love never dies.

Love is like frosting. Without frosting, cake can sometimes be kind of dry. But frosting by itself is no good either. Unless you're five, but the hope is that we all mature past that point. Kids go for the frosting first, in part, because a cupcake is too big for them to get their mouths around. They have to pick somewhere to start, so they pick the best – the frosting. How many of us are guilty of the same thing? It seems too daunting to combine our love and our actions in the radical way Paul describes. So instead, we pick one piece we think we can tackle. For some of us, the frosting is doing. Action. For some of us the frosting is the sentimental, emotional kind of love. But Paul reminds us that what was acceptable when we were children is not what we should do as adults. "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I ate frosting like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways."

So the challenge today is to consider whether you are living up to love as Paul describes it. Are you sharing your spiritual gifts? Are you participating in the life of the church? And are you doing it with love – Christian love, the kind of love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things? Amen and amen.