

## “Paul – The Apostle of Love”

1 Corinthians 11:17-33; 1 Corinthians 13

### **The Apostle of Love. Paul? Really? – Yes and yes**

Last week, we began looking at Paul’s letter to the house churches in Corinth, Greece, which we know as 1 Corinthians. This week, we turn to portions of the letter that speak to love. Holy Communion is all about Christ’s love for us, indeed for the whole world. In Corinth, however, this sacred meal was being abused and the house churches weakened as a result.



For Christians, Holy Communion has always been at the heart of our faith. We may hold some differing beliefs about it and practice the meal differently, but, still, we have been taking Communion together since the first years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Before we get to Corinth, let’s talk about how we Methodists come to this.

#### **A bridge**

Christians are all over the place when it comes to Holy Communion. We all (or at least, most) affirm that it is breathtakingly significant. But ask “what is really happening?” and you’ll get a lot of answers. Scripture doesn’t help much here. What exactly did Jesus mean when he said “This is my body . . . this is my blood?” or “Do this in remembrance of me.” The disciples were perplexed and so are we.

In keeping with John Wesley, Methodists are theologians of the middle. We are a bridging church. This reflects our roots in the Church of England, which, during the Protestant reformation, sought to hold together those who wanted to stay with Rome and those who sought a return to “primitive” Christianity (the Puritans, for example). We see this Methodist (and Anglican) commitment to finding the middle way, the *via media*, in many areas of Christian doctrine and practice, including our understanding of Holy Communion. Since we are searching for the middle way, let’s look at the two extremes.

On the one hand, there are the Roman Catholics, for whom the elements of Communion are changed from bread and wine to the actual body and blood of Christ, through their transubstantiation. On the other hand are our Baptist brothers and sisters, for whom Communion is usually seen as a mere remembering of Jesus’ sacrifice.

In our striving to find the middle way, Methodists embrace that Jesus Christ is really present at Communion, in a way that he is not otherwise, but we do not try to explain exactly how we experience Christ’s presence. We hold that “in

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### Transubstantiation

There’s a mouthful. Many protestants think Roman Catholics believe that at Communion, the bread and wine are magically changed into the body and blood of Christ. This seems like nonsense since the bread and wine still look and taste like bread and wine. Perhaps this will help. This Roman Catholic doctrine is grounded in Aristotle’s understanding of reality, as worked out by Thomas Aquinas and others. Aristotle held that every object consists of accidents and substance. The object’s accidents are all of its physical properties, everything that can be perceived by our senses. Its substance is its essence. For example, the accidents of this piece of paper you are holding are its color, size, texture, shape, smell and so on – everything that makes it paper so far as you can tell. But for Aristotle, its essence, its underlying “paper-ness” is something different; it is its substance. In other words, the piece of paper’s substance is separate from the paper’s physical properties. Aquinas and others applied Aristotle’s view of reality to the bread and wine of communion. The doctrine of transubstantiation (“conversion in substance”) holds that when the bread and wine are blessed, their accidents remain as they were. They still look and taste like bread and wine. But . . . the substance of the bread and wine is converted from “bread-ness” and “wine-ness” to “Christ-ness.” They may taste like bread and wine, but the underlying reality is that they have become the body and blood of Christ. Thus, Roman Catholics claim the actual physical presence of Christ at Communion.

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remembrance” is far more than a symbolic recalling of Jesus’ death; it is the dynamic re-presentation of the living Christ. Christ is with us in this meal in a way that he is not otherwise.

### ***Tearing down communion***

In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth on a number of different topics. One is their abuse of the Lord’s Supper. Now, I’m sure that none of them thought they were tearing down anything. Nonetheless, their unwillingness to embrace their new identities in Christ was creating deep and deadly divisions in this fragile outpost of God’s kingdom.

In the first decades of Christianity, when the followers of Jesus gathered, they shared a meal. For some, it was probably the best meal they got all week. It is clear from Paul’s scolding of the Corinthian Christians that they often forgot why they shared this meal that Jesus had given them. Some ate like gluttons. Some even got drunk. And, worst of all, some were excluded from the meal. I haven’t seen anyone ever stagger away from our Holy Communion at First UMC, but I wonder how much thought we ourselves give to what is really happening when we eat the bread and drink from the cup.

Sadly, the Corinthians had forgotten that Jesus’ sacrifice was the supreme act of love. Their abuses of the meal spoke to the need for them to truly grasp that though faith and hope remain, it is love, love for God and love for one another, that is above all (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Paul didn’t write the famous words of 1 Corinthians 13 so they could be used in weddings, but so that the Corinthians could understand and live in true Christian love with each other. At Holy Communion and in all times and places. But they heard the original Greek of 1 Corinthians 13. What did they hear?

### ***The love chapter***

In our culture, “love” has become a word that is used so freely, to express so many different ideas and feelings, that it has become almost useless. I “love” God, I “love” my family, I “love” my dog, I “love” peanut butter (ok, I do!). Because we use the word in so many ways, we need to begin with a brief look at the biblical use of the word “love.”

In the Old Testament, our love for God is focused on the delight and joy we find in God. Our love for God is our seeking after God himself. Our love for God is bound up with our obedience. Those who love God are those who keep his commandments (Deut 5:10), serve him, and walk in his ways (Deut 10:12). At the same time, our love for God is to be an internal matter, an affair of the heart (Jeremiah 31:33). Much more than simply affection for God or others, love encompasses the whole person – our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

God’s love is focused on his people, as a nation or community, more than on any specific individual. God’s love for his people is manifested in his relentless pursuit of Israel despite their endless abandonment of him and the covenant. The story of Hosea gives concrete expression to God’s unfathomable, incomprehensible love for the people he has chosen. God instructs Hosea that he is to love and marry a prostitute, Gomer, and continue loving her, no matter what she does to shame and dishonor him. God loves Israel and Hosea is to love Gomer – regardless.

In the New Testament, Jesus builds on the Old Testament understanding of love but makes it completely unconditional. Our love for God represents total commitment and trust. Our love for neighbor is extended to all humanity and cannot be separated from our caring for the marginalized in our society. Jesus even makes clear that our love for neighbor is extended to our enemies – all are included!

### ***Yes, love really is a verb***

A few years ago, I came across a passage from Dr. Sarah Ruden that I decided to share with you. Ruden is not a New Testament scholar, but a classicist, having made her academic career in the translation of major Greek and Latin works from the ancient world, such as the *Aeneid*. She set out to read Paul in the context of his first-century Greco-Roman language and culture. Her observations are both original and fascinating. This excerpt from her book is long, but very worthwhile.

What is agape [love], then? Paul begins to answer this, with several sharp shifts in focus.

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.

Paul has been speaking in the first person, but now moves to the third. Love is something outside himself, but really more like a someone since it does so many things and has so many human characteristics. Before, we were reading of religion, but most of the way through this present list, we find nothing that can apply directly to a relationship with God, only to relationships with other human beings— unless we can somehow imagine that God needs kindness or patience. Only at the end do more religious words come back: rejoicing in the truth, believing, hoping. But the repeated “all things” (or “everything”) in verse 7 suggests that the goal is still to deal with the everyday world in an exemplary way. These humble virtues are what absolutely never come to an end. They outlast any worship, wisdom, or inspiration.

The break in style in the Greek at the beginning of this section is startling. I made a long search for parallels to this new style, and I ended up feeling like a pedantic moron for missing the whole point: these words are not supposed to be like anything else.

It’s more or less a necessity of our language that the standard translations here contain a lot of adjectives. But the Greek is extreme in not containing a single one. Instead, we have a mass of verbs, things love does and doesn’t do. This is the ultimate authority for the saying “Love is a verb.”

Since the wording is so simple, I can translate this piece fairly literally without creating nonsense. I am also going to take out spaces between the words, punctuation, and the distinction between capital and small letters— none of these would have appeared in the original ancient manuscript. Below is an English version of what Paul’s readers saw on the page. To get a sense of what it sounded like when read aloud (a very common practice everywhere, but doubtless more common in the Christian churches, where many members were illiterate), read three times as fast as you would normally, in the typical manner of a Mediterranean language. This will produce something closer to the original machine gun of verbs:

THELOVEENDURES LONGACTSKINDLYTHELOVENOTACTSJEALOUSLYNOTACTS  
TSBRUTALLYNOTBOASTSNOTGETSFULLOFITSELFNOTDISGRACESITSELFN  
OTSEEKSWHATISITSONNOTGETSIRRITATEDNOTRECKONSUPTHEEVILNO  
TREJOICESINTHEINJUSTICEBUTREJOICESTOGETHERINTHETRUTHENDURE  
SEVERYTHINGBELIEVESEVERYTHINGHOPESEVERYTHINGENDURESEVERYT  
HINGTHELOVENEVERFALLS

So manically verb-centered is the passage that Paul takes two adjectives and creates a one-word verb from each (neither verb being attested previously in Greek); and he creates yet another verb, in Greek a one-word metaphor:

1. “[is] kind” (verb: “kinds”)
2. “[is] boastful” (verb: “boastfuls”)
3. “[is] arrogant” (verb: “inflates-like-a-bellows”)

If we take the meaning from the form, we could say that he is preaching, “You know the right ways to feel? Turn those feelings into acts and perform those acts, ceaselessly. You know the wrong ways to feel? Don’t, ever, perform the acts that spring from them.”<sup>1</sup>

Action – inwardly and outwardly. That is the life of the church. We have been forgiven, liberated, for a reason. It can never be simply “freedom from.” Rather, our liberation from sin and death is a “freedom for.” For those who need our love, who need our help.

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<sup>1</sup> Ruden, Sarah (2010-02-10). *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time* (Kindle Locations 2821-2836). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.