OFTEN HEARD, RARELY HEEDED
1Corinthinans 13

FOCUS: We are familiar with the words, but our lives fail to adequately reflect more than head knowledge of the message.

They are frequently repeated at weddings and adorn lovely greeting cards, especially this time of year as Valentine’s Day approaches. They hang on walls, are displayed on desks and jotted down on notes and letters. The middle verses of our morning’s text are some of the most familiar words of Paul. Mention 1 Corinthians 13 and lots of folks, especially good church folks will respond, oh yes, the love chapter. And so it is. Out text is all about love, real love, heartfelt love, godly love, the kind which encompasses much more than sentimental emotion and warm wishes.

I find myself a bit obsessed with things grammatical these days. I confess, I scanned this morning’s manuscript for the word “that” and purged almost all occurrences, which were numerous. Last week we lamented the cheapening of the powerful word “awesome”. We considered the way we declare everything from the most mundane to the truly amazing and inspiring, “awesome”. This week my mission is to rescue the central word of our text from our exuberance as well. We misuse “love” much as we do “awesome”. Recall the last time you used the word “love”. Consider how many times you have used it over the last day or so, perhaps even how many times you have said it just this morning. We declare “love” for all sorts of things at the drop of a hat. We just love awesome stuff don’t we? Lost in the fog of overuse is the deep, challenging meaning of genuine love, of God’s kind of love. We have demoted the emotion, making it little more than a passing fancy or pleasant feeling. We love our favorite foods, good music, our electronic gadgets, our clothes, you name it. We need to promote love to its rightful rank.

The first, and considered preferred, dictionary definition of “love” is: ***“a strong affection for another arising out of kinship, personal ties, sexual desire, admiration, or common interest.”*** The second is ***“a warm attachment, enthusiasm, or devotion.”*** Third is ***“the object of attachment, devotion, or admiration”*** for example, alove for the game of baseball. Only as we come to the fourth most preferred definition was there anything which even remotely resembles the kind of love I want us to encounter this morning. There we read that love is ***“an*** ***unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another.”*** Now there is a definition we can sink our teeth into, one with which Paul might agree. In his letter to the Corinthian church, for which he had much affection, Paul deals with love in its purest form, love which serves to guide and to correct, love which has a depth of meaning far deeper than simple affection or sensual attraction.

A couple of weeks ago we considered the twelfth chapter of this letter. There Paul spoke of spiritual gifts and reminded the church in Corinth as he reminds us, the church in Daleville, all of us have gifts, all gifts are equally valuable in God’s eyes and all are given for the common ministry of the church. Then to a church which was struggling with division, dealing with an abundance of pride, populated with a good number of folk who were certain their particular gifts were more special than those given to other members of the household of faith, to the church, Paul says: ***“Gifts are important, making use of them is a good thing, focusing on them may not be all bad, but now I want to show you a way of living which is far better than life focused on particular individual gifts. I want to show you a far better way of looking at things.”***

Paul then goes to meddling. He was a pretty proficient meddler. But unlike most of us, he meddled in folks lives, not to boost his ego, not out of idle curiosity, not to put down even the worst offender. Rather, he meddled in hopes of leading everyone down the better, if much more challenging path of righteous living. He begins by poking huge holes in the bloated egos of many of the leaders in the church. He takes on, not the slackers who do nothing. He takes on those many would consider to be the real backbone of the church. It is those who preach inspiring sermons. It is those who speak words of prophecy. It is those who have great theological wisdom. It is those with the gift of tongues. It is even those of great faith Paul calls to account.

Paul doesn’t belittle the gifts of those he calls to accountability. He recognizes they, like all of us, are truly gifted. They are given the skills for a valid and important ministry. The problem wasn’t the gift, not even the way the gift was being used. The problem was the attitude and the motivation. Paul says, no matter how impressive their gifts, no matter how well they speak, no matter how accurate their prophecy, no matter how sincere their faith, no matter how spectacular or even sacrificial their actions, unless their ministry is undergirded by love, they have failed. The enormity of what Paul says cannot be overstated. His words are radical, nearly incomprehensible. Those who are about even the most important of Godly tasks are nothing and gain nothing if they don’t do what they are gifted to do out of genuine love.

Paul doesn’t leave us to wonder what Godly love looks like. He spells out it in plain Greek. The words are clear, the implications unmistakable, and the challenge intimidating. Intimidating because living the kind of life to which Paul called the church, and to which the church is called today, though really quite simple is never easy. Intimidating because loving as God loves requires an extreme makeover of our innermost selves.

Consider the words Paul used to describe the kind of love to which we are all being called. It is patient, kind, neither envious nor boastful. Neither arrogant nor rude. What a mouthful! Paul understands genuine human love to be a reflection of the love of God. It is a self-sacrificing, compassionate and gracious kind of love. The words of the apostle are as relevant and as meaningful today as they were when he first spoke them. We live in a world much the same as the world in which Paul live, it is the kind of world which will always be around. The world sees weakness in humility. The world gives tacit affirmation to pride, and selfishness is frequently excused as simply a necessity of life in this dog eat dog society. But Paul says, be different, live humbly, love unconditionally, affirm others and don’t worry about what you get out of it. Paul recognizes love is not all about him, and it is not all about us.

We are not to neglect ourselves, or walk around with a resentful scowl on our faces. Jesus tells us he came not only to offer salvation, but also to offer each of us an abundant life. We are told one of the marks of those who allow the Spirit of God to infect their lives is joy. The key is to recognize life is not just about us as individuals, it is always about the collective “us” of shared humanity and shared community. The wonderful paradox is, if we live life truly focused on others and on God, we will inevitably find joy, peace and fulfillment.

So why are we so often restless? Why do we so often feel unfulfilled? Why is frustration always so close to the surface? It is because we are looking for love in all the wrong places and in all the wrong ways, and have been doing so for a long time. But there is a far better way. So as you go about your business today and tomorrow and this week think back to our scripture, perhaps make it a point to read at least verses four through seven each morning. Then perhaps when you are tempted to become frustrated with a coworker who knows how to push all your buttons, you will remember, love is patient. Maybe when you are tempted to spread some juicy rumor you will be reminded, love doesn’t rejoice in the misfortunes of others. Perhaps when things don’t go exactly the way you planned you will be able to accept the notion love doesn’t insist on getting its own way. And when you do, life will be good and you will find the joy, the peace, the fulfillment which has eluded you for far too long.

In its closing words this marvelous passage offers one final comforting word. Paul reminds us it is not just ok, it is natural not to fully understand how God works. There is something ethereal and wonderfully mysterious about fog. I actually like a good foggy morning. If you do not have to drive in it, fog can be quite lovely and completely changes the way we look at things. It forces us to pay close attention to what is right around us lest we move to fast and come upon some shrouded obstacle. Fog severely limits our vision and alters our perception in an oddly beautiful way.

But just because things are obscured when the fog comes does not mean they are not there. My favorite place to experience fog is in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Occasionally as we have vacationed there we have witnessed the remarkable beauty of fog in the valleys below our campsite or motel room. You wake in the morning and see only the tips of the highest mountains rising above a sea of white. But once the sun comes out, and the fog lifts, there is an entirely different vista before you. There are lush valleys, perhaps some busy highways, villages or towns. There are farms and communities, rivers and streams which were hidden but none the less were there all the time.

The most literal translations of verse 12 says we currently see dimly, like in a mirror. In those days, mirrors were nothing like what we have, those horrid contraptions which accurately reflect things, like our wrinkles and bags, precisely as they are. But the mirrors with which Paul was familiar were made of bronze or silver and, while useful, offered a limited and somewhat distorted reflection of reality.

Peterson captures the essence of what Paul was saying in contemporary language when he writes: ***“We don’t yet see things clearly. We’re squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won’t be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We’ll see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing God directly, just as God knows us!”*** There is a lot about this world I don’t understand, not to mention the mysteries of God’s infinite universe. Even the most brilliant of scientists will tell you the knowledge he or she possesses is but the tip of the iceberg when it comes to understanding the created order.

There are a lot of things I want to know when the sun comes out and I can see clearly. Things like why we have to have roaches and why we need natural disasters. Things like why the foods which taste the best are inevitably the ones least healthy and why bad things happen to good people. I don’t expect to have those answers in this lifetime, and that is ok, as it ought to be. For we are called to be people of faith, those who accept the fact we don’t see or understand it all yet, those whose live confidently despite some unanswered questions and a bit of fog. We are called to affirm with our lives the words of Paul who wrote ***“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”***

There is much about life I do not fully understand. There are passages in the Bible which are frankly a bit obscure. Once again I am reminded of my favorite Mark Twain quote. Yes I refer to it often, because I need to be reminded of its truth often. Twain once said, ***“It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”*** I understand what our text says about the nature of love and I am bothered by how often my life fails to reflect the words. This often repeated love chapter ends with these words. ***“For now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”*** In The Message Paul writes, ***“For right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.”***

Ours is an amazingly simple faith. We are called to accept God’s grace and to claim as ours the free gift of eternal salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ. Then we are called to live lives which reflect what Jesus called the great commandments, both of which are grounded in love. We are called to love God with our whole being. And we are called to love others deeply, genuinely and without reserve.

Simple, to be sure. But never easy. For as we have discovered real, Godly love calls for a revolutionary life style, calls us to put aside our innate bent to sinning, calls us to become new creatures. We hear a lot of debate about literal interpretation of scripture verses a broader form of interpretation which takes into account such things as cultural and demographic influences. But when it comes to passages such as the one we have before us, it makes little difference which side of the fence one stands on, the message is clear. We are all called to radical lives, filled to the brim with unmitigated love, love which challenges us to put aside our pettiness, to throw away our scorecards, to die to self and to live for the common good of all God’s children.

It is time to put aside our childish ways, to overcome our selfishness, and to grow into the fullness of a life lived, all the time, or at least as often as humanly possible, guide by faith, filled with hope and marked in all things by real, heartfelt love. For your sake, for the sake of a love starved world and for the sake of the kingdom of the God whose nature is love, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.