

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

February 2, 2025 (4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, Year C)  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

I don't know if you've heard about it, or if it's been getting any publicity or anything, but next Sunday is the SUPER BOWL. Okay, maybe you DID know. The Super Bowl's the most watched event on the planet. WELL over 100 million people watch the game. I read somewhere that they're expecting FEWER viewers this year. I don't know why (coughing "REFEREES"). I don't know, but it's still a huge media event, even if the games aren't ALWAYS EXCITING.

Now, one of the intriguing things about football, and especially the Super bowl, is that the game is built around violence and conflict, but SOMEHOW it manages to bring people TOGETHER. People gather with their friends to watch the game TOGETHER, and it doesn't matter if YOUR favorite team isn't playing. What the creators of things like Ultimate Fighting don't realize is that it's NOT the violence that attracts us; it's the GAME ITSELF: the strategy and the teamwork. The team that WORKS together the BEST usually wins, and there's something ABOUT that that's BEAUTIFUL to watch.

Most of the time our verses from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians are read at WEDDINGS, and that's appropriate, because what it says ABOUT LOVE is UNIVERSAL. But when the Apostle Paul WROTE these words, he had a very DIFFERENT audience in mind. He was writing about a CHURCH. He was writing to a COMMUNITY, a CONFLICTED community, a CHURCH DEEPLY DIVIDED and in pain. And his advice to the Corinthians is SIMPLE really – "Remember who you are. Let your LIFE TOGETHER, EVERYTHING you do, be GUIDED by LOVE."

Now, most people think of LOVE as simply a FEELING you have for someone. Just a warm, fuzzy, sentimental feeling. I'm in FAVOR of good feelings, don't get me wrong, but there's a problem – FEELINGS are undependable. FEELING love can be affected by physical and mental health, what and how much you have to eat and drink, what goes on at work, how the kids are behaving, biorhythms, you name it. You can't decide HOW you're going to feel – you just FEEL. Unfortunately, this is why many MARRIAGES FAIL, because love in our culture has become so sentimental. People who think of love as ONLY a FEELING fall OUT of love as quickly as they fall into it. The FEELING of love is undependable and uncontrollable. But our relationships, personal AND communal, are TOO important to be built upon a foundation so shaky.

St. Paul had BEDROCK in mind. He writes in 1 Corinthians about a TOUGH, DURABLE kind of love, a love that KEEPS on loving NO MATTER WHAT. The whole reading is love, love, love, but never ONCE does he mention a FEELING. He describes ways of BEING AND DOING. He describes HOW to love, and what love does NOT do.

There are times, in EVERY relationship, of anger, and sadness, and conflict. There are times when we really do NOT LIKE each other very much - and that's NORMAL. There's no one in the whole WORLD you can feel good about ALL the time! But the love that Paul writes about loves not ONLY when someone is pleasing us, but EVEN when they're being cantankerous, obnoxious, difficult, stubborn, and seemingly un-lovable, sometimes even UNLIKABLE. St. Paul says, even when we're ANGRY, we will love. Even when we've been SLIGHTED, we will love. Even when we've been HURT, we will love. We may not FEEL like it, but we will LOVE ANYWAY.

We CAN'T always FEEL love, but we CAN DO love. CHRISTIAN love is action. MATURE love is a decision. REGARDLESS of how we FEEL—angry, sad, happy, tired, or nothing at all—we will CHOOSE to LOVE, CHOOSE to DO the LOVING, KIND ACTION.

"LOVE is PATIENT; love is kind," Paul says. Why are patience and kindness so difficult? It's in the next line. "Love does not insist on its OWN way; it is not irritable or resentful." Isn't that where

EVERY FIGHT STARTS, INSISTING on its OWN way? Paul reminds us here what we've heard COUNTLESS TIMES from Jesus and THROUGHOUT scripture – it's NOT ABOUT YOU.

We have to ask ourselves, if we're not to insist on our OWN way, then WHOSE way ARE we to insist upon?

There are some verses often attributed to Mother Teresa that speak to this. They were written on the wall of her home for children in Calcutta. Some say the words were on the wall in Mother Teresa's own room. They SEEM to be based on a composition originally written by Kent Keith. It reads:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between YOU AND GOD. It was NEVER between you and THEM ANYWAY.

The kind of love we're TALKING about comes, of COURSE, not from US, but from GOD, the God who IS LOVE. God holds us with a love that NEVER wavers, NEVER falters, a love that's unconditional. And THEN He asks us to pass that love on to EACH OTHER.

Paul goes on, "Love bears all things." We don't NEED to bear our burdens alone. We're MEANT to bear each OTHER'S burdens, to lift one ANOTHER up.

"Love believes all things." Our faith is not in ourselves and what WE can do; our faith is in our LORD, who has a MISSION and a PURPOSE for this place. We are always being called to lean INTO the future and discern TOGETHER what God has in mind for us to GET there.

"Love hopes all things. Love endures all things." It's not enough to say, "This too shall pass." Christian love doesn't STOP AT ENDURANCE through the tough times. It takes the joys and sorrows TOGETHER, and not ONLY ENDURES them, but looks forward with HOPE to something NEW, AND UNEXPECTED, AND BEAUTIFUL.

"Love never ends." This is the end of this SERMON, but NOT the end for US. As long as you have love to GIVE, God will give you PEOPLE to share it WITH. As long as you're willing to serve and change, First will continue to be a SHINING LIGHT in this community, for generations to come.

"And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these, the GREATEST of these is love." Amen.