

## *“The Way of Love”*

*Isaiah 7:10-16; I Corinthians 13:1-13*

December 18, 2022

When Natalie was pregnant with Benjamin, someone gave us a wonderful gift of a Fisher Price clock toy. You probably had this clock if you had kids somewhere between 1970 and the present day. I say that because in my parent’s house before Mom moved there was an almost identical Fisher Price clock. It played the exact same tune, had the exact same graphics on the clock. To the untrained eye, the two looked almost identical. There were some differences, to be sure. For one thing, the one bought for us for Benjamin was made out of plastic, the one nestled in Mom’s attic was made entirely of wood. Also, there was the matter of dimensions. Mom’s Fisher Price clock was about 25% larger, let’s say. Because of the wood and the size, it felt more substantial. And you know what also makes them different? The one bought in the 2000s broke after just a few plays. Mom’s clock? You guessed it, still running despite being over 50 years old now and dozens of kids have played with the thing from my sister and I to our children to, perhaps one day, our children’s children.

All that to say, things change over time. And, in the case of the Fisher Price wooden clock, I think you’d have to say that things get cheaper over time if you were a jaded person. It sure is the case with Hallmark Christmas movies. Seems like the older ones are better, but I could be wrong, might just be getting old. But one thing is for sure after reading 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13, our understandings of love have gotten cheaper, more self-focused.

In the modern context where everything is about me, myself and I, it’s only an anticipated consequent that love becomes something cheaper, less durable, less good, right?

Although it’s cooled down a bit, thanks to the pandemic largely, the divorce rate in America is a pretty good indicator of how durable we think love is. After all, at the altar, we promise to love our mates through plenty and want, sickness and health but for a great many of us, that love becomes disposable as it intersects with self-interest. Because for nearly half of us still in this country, those vows will end on a judge’s desk as parties file for divorce. The death, supposedly, of love.

You see, ever since Kant upended the world with his rather ludicrous philosophies, we’ve been on a collision course with total self-centeredness. You see, prior to Kant, we thought we lived in and shared, objective universe. One in which there was a God who defined right and wrong for us. Kant rewired our minds, literally made us think the world revolved around us and so our sense of entitlement has only been getting worse since the 18<sup>th</sup> century but that’s a sermon for another day.

The long and short of it is, is that American society often places the wrong emphasis on love, rendering it into something more of a feeling than anything else. But that’s a far cry from the way love is pictured in our Scripture. There, love isn’t so much a feeling as it is an action. A verb.

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 gives us a much, much more robust understanding of what love is, doesn’t it? This passage, most often heard at weddings or in Hallmark cards, shows us that amazing durability of love. Love isn’t some fleeting thing, some passing emotion. Love is instead eternal and effective. What do I mean by eternal? Did you hear what Paul just said. Prophecies will pass away, tongues will pass away, spiritual gifts will end but love will never end.

Why is that? Because real love is made flesh for us in Jesus Christ.

According to **Galatians 4:4-7** – *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”* So, you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”

What Paul is telling us is that Jesus Christ chose to become one of us to redeem us from our transgressions. Our sins had us locked into a cycle of misery leading to our eternal death. So, in His eternal love for us, Jesus Christ came to make it possible for us to have eternal life. **John 3:16-17** – *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.”*

In this one verse we get a distillation of the Gospel message. Salvation has arrived in the person of Jesus Christ. Our salvation is enterally linked to Him through our faith in Him which is itself the gift of God as we are reminded in Ephesians so that “no one may boast.”

Love bears all things, that’s what Paul says. But consider this. Jesus was willing to bear our sins, all of them.

That's the kind of love Jesus Christ has for the elect. What's amazing to me is the fact that Jesus would've known exactly what was going to happen to Him from the moment of creation forward. And He did it anyway.

When I was a younger man, most all of my friends were outdoorsy. They loved hiking and fishing and going out into the wilderness. I did not. Wasn't a Boy Scout, didn't cotton too much to camping. So, when my friends invited me to do an Outward Bound experience with them, I should've said no faster than a bullet train. But I didn't. For some reason that still haunts me to this day, I said yes. I'll never forget the first day. The instructor told us we were going to do a little hike to get to our base camp, then we'd hunker down for the night. Well, I should've known by what time it was this "little hike" wasn't going to be so short. But anyway, up and down we went. It was on that quote, unquote little hike that I realized that downhill walks with gear become just as tiring over time as uphill walks, they just use different muscles. For me, it got to the point where every step was pure misery. I'd rubbed several blisters so my feet hurt to say nothing of the fatigue which was overtaking my muscles. On and on and on it kept going. I kept getting more and more miserable. I thought it would never end. To make matters worse, my friends were eating it up, just loving being out in nature. Finally, our leader told us that we were there, we'd made it to where we were going to camp. I'm not kidding y'all, I literally fell down to the ground, exhausted. Now look, if someone had showed me exactly what that trip was going to be like ahead of time, I am here to tell you, I SURELY wouldn't have gone.

Which makes me appreciate Jesus even more. Before creation, Jesus would've known exactly how things were going to turn out. It was in His amazing LOVE that Jesus chose to become flesh, knowing ahead of time exactly all that He'd have to endure to make sure that His people were saved. And yet, Jesus, knowing full well the cost of the Cross, still chose to create us anyway. Even knowing that we'd betray Him, the Lord our God chose freely to make us, calling our names before the foundation of the earth, inscribing them in His Book of life. **John 14:19** – *"Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live."* We Christians believe and profess that, even now, Jesus rests on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead as we say in the Apostles' Creed every Sunday morning. But although He is not with us in the flesh, He is with us by the power of the Holy Spirit, bringing Jesus' love forward to us.

That means Jesus' love is as present with us today as it has always been all the days of our lives. If love is eternal because it is eternally attached to Jesus Christ, then He should become the way we understand love. Here, the Greek language does a bit of the heavy lifting for us that is, as they say, lost in translation. For you see we only have one word for love. We say love whether it's romantic love, brotherly love, familial love, we just say love. But in the ancient koine Greek that Paul was writing in, several words for love were available.

Eros is a kind of love that Paul could've written about. That's the love we feel for a spouse or mate. That giddy, weak-in-the-knee feeling we think about when we think of Hallmark movies and other romances. That's eros love. So too is there the kind of love you feel for like, your family members. That was a word called storge. You feel this kind of love towards your aunts and uncles and those other relatives who populate your Thanksgiving and Christmas tables. Then there's also philia. This is the kind of love that exists between good friends. It's the root word for Philadelphia which is called what? That's right, the city of Brotherly Love. Right, but they've got a literal jail in their football stadium. Hard to reconcile Philadelphia football fans with the concept of brotherly love but, again, that's a sermon for another day, I guess.

So, Paul had options when it came to talking about love in a Christian context. But the word he uses to describe the love that comes from Jesus Christ is agape love. Agape love is a sacrificial love that unites and heals. Agape is a self-emptying love that doesn't seek to build up the person who holds it. It is the love of God that we see through the cross of Jesus Christ. This love saves and restores humanity in the face of sin and death. Agape is a love that voluntarily suffers inconvenience, discomfort, and even death for the benefit of another without expecting anything in return.

**John 15:13** – *"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."* Jesus Christ, a perfectly innocent man, accepted a guilty verdict on behalf of us. In order to reconcile us to God, Jesus Christ bore the indignity of being whipped, beaten, and mocked by others, the Son of God, mind you, in order that we be saved from the scourge of sin and the penalty of eternal death. **1 Peter 2:24** – *"He [Jesus] bore our sins on His body on the cross that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His Stripes, we are healed."* This Jesus Christ, this Son of God, the eternal one brings forward God's eternal, agape love. This self-emptying love

doesn't exist for the benefit of the one holding it but rather for the one it is being held for. That's just another way of saying agape love isn't so much a feeling as it is an action.

I really see this every time Natalie walks in the door. Every time Natalie comes in, a parade of cats comes to greet her. In fact, from the moment she sits down, there is a queue of kitties that arrives to sit on her lap. When I come home, I'm lucky if the cats lift their heads from their slumber. And the reason is clear, while I feed them some of the time, the vast, vast care comes from Natalie. She does the work, scoops the litterboxes, gives the medicines, plays with them. She's the primary love-giver, so it's only understandable she's the love receiver.

Yes, love is an action, that's what's most clearly lost in modern times. That it isn't so much what we feel in love, although that's nice, it's what we do that affects people.

That's the other thing about agape love that shouldn't be overlooked. Just as Christ's love was effective for our salvation, so too is our love effective for the one to whom it is being given. That is to say that love should have a positive effect on the life of the beloved. This is one of the reasons why we have that phrase, toxic love. Toxic love isn't really love at all but is instead a close-looking, awful cousin. It isn't real love because, as Paul tells us in **1 Corinthians 13** – *"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."* And the Love of Christ builds up the body.

Just before this material, Paul is talking about spiritual gifts and how they bless the church. Ah, but you see, the church at Corinth, well, it's a hot mess. You see, some of the members are lording their spiritual gifts over the ones with different or lesser gifts. This is a terrible inversion of love, in Paul's mind. Thus, He comes with this rather lengthy list of what love is and what love isn't for the people in the church. Paul wants them to see that at the front and center of any Christian congregation should be the love between its' members.

**John 13:35** – *"By this all people will know that You are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* This is an important part of any church. The love that exists between its members. I know this kind of love exists at this church. I know it because I see how many cards and meals get delivered to our people when they come into a time of need. I've seen this congregation rally around members who are struggling at a level unlike I've ever seen at any of the churches I've served thus far. Cooks' is truly blessed with a sense of agape love between her members. And that will serve us well. And this love is going to serve us well as we navigate these uncertain times in which the numbers of people our pews has dwindled.

Paul Harvey told a story one time long ago about a monastery that was dying. It was down to just seven men. As a result, the place had become a bit of a ramshackle and the brothers, constantly worried about whether or not their order would survive took to bickering with one another about what to do to save the place. Finally, someone suggested sending an emissary to a nearby spiritual leader. This priest lived on the edge of a city, ministering to the people in it. When the monk from the monastery got there, he noticed that things there didn't look quite up to snuff, either. The old priest shared that fewer and fewer people were seeking out his wisdom. The brother shared his experience and the two commiserated. On the way out the door, the older spiritual leader said, "well, just remember that Jesus is among you in this." But what was meant rhetorically was taken literally and the brother came back, convinced that what the older priest meant was that Jesus HIMSELF was living among the brothers. Because of this, this uncertainty, all the brothers began treating each other with tremendous love and respect. Over time, that love spilled out from between the brothers, into their physical space. The brothers began the long work of clearing and restoring their surroundings. After all, if Jesus was in their midst, shouldn't it be wonderful for Him. So too did the monk's dedication to one another go so far as to inspire others to come and learn from them. This led to the acquisition of more novices. The monastery was saved. And it was saved by an agape love that is birthed in Jesus Christ, carried to us via the Holy Spirit where it dwells within us, closer even than our next breath.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.