

I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. *Amen.*

Yesterday morning I tagged along when our EPIC youth went to Asheville to attend a Shabbat service at Beth Israel Synagogue. I loved the welcome we received there and the opportunity to ask questions about a service we really didn't understand because it was almost entirely in Hebrew. I loved seeing our young people together, enjoying each other's company. It was a beautiful day, and though I didn't love getting up early on Saturday morning, I loved driving in the sunshine, listening to the golden oldies of my youth on the radio. I loved having some time to relax when I got home. I love being at home. I love chocolate and other sugary snacks, and that's why I can't keep them in the house. I love a good book, I love spending time with friends. I love clothes and shoes and pretty things. I love food and I *love* an iced caramel machiatto on a lazy summer afternoon. I love a lot of things, and from our conversations, I think you do, too. We've managed to make "love" one of the most over used, over worked words in the English language. We either fail to discriminate, or we don't really understand what love is, what the word means. From the way we act, generally speaking, I'd guess that we don't really understand what love is or how love acts.

The Greeks had more than one word for love. Depending on your source, there are either four or six Greek words for love, and each of them is very specific. We're most familiar with the Greek words *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*. *Philia* is an affectionate regard for others, like friendship, or for things. *Eros* is romantic, passionate love between two people. *Agape* is an expression of the love of God for man and the love of man for God. If we were to use these Greek words to distinguish the types of love that we experience, we might use *philia* for all the "things" we love. *Eros* would be used to describe the feelings between two people who care deeply for each other. *Agape* is a selfless love demonstrated by charity and sacrifice. It's given without the expectation of anything being given in return. It's what Jesus meant in the Great Commandment when he said "love your neighbor as yourself." Someone once said that *agape* is the Gospel itself.

Today's passage from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is often called the "love hymn" and is one of the most frequently used passages at weddings. You can see why. The behavior Paul speaks of describes a way of loving another that all of us would like to experience in our relationships, especially when we're promising to love, comfort, and honor that person until death us do part. There's no doubt that being faithful to another, forsaking all others, would be much easier if he or she were patient and kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant, rude or irritable or resentful. If both persons in a couple could act that way, it would be even better. That would be a marriage made in heaven, for sure. Who wouldn't want that!

Paul never married, so he probably didn't know much about what daily life together means for two people, and how hard loving another can be within a marriage. But he did know what was important in a community of faith like the one at Corinth. As Lewis Galloway wrote in his commentary on this passage, "These words come to life when one remembers that they arose out of a pastoral crisis in the Corinthian church. The Corinthian Christians are abusing their freedom, refusing to share, scorning their neighbors' spiritual gifts, boasting in their own gifts, seeking recognition for themselves and jockeying for position in the church."<sup>1</sup>

Despite two thousand years of practice, churches experience comparable conflicts still today. I suspect Paul would be shaking his head and pointing his finger at the contemporary church in today's post-Christian world where our values and our lives are not always complementary of one another. Disagreement and self-interest are far more prevalent in our world than love and kindness. Sadly, many have left the Church because that is what they've experienced within it. We

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<sup>1</sup> Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown, eds. *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*, p. 302.

are, all of us complicit—both clergy and lay—and all of us have both the opportunity and the ability to change. In these thirteen verses of the “love hymn,” Paul gives us an idea of what it will take.

Yesterday at Beth Israel, the lay preacher was a woman named Roberta who would be formally welcomed into the community later in the service. She spoke about silence and about listening, whether to the silence or to one another, in order to fully experience the story being told, even when we’ve heard it before. Listening, hearing one another is an act of love and affirmation that builds and strengthens our community, just as patience and kindness do. These are unselfish acts, ways for us to practice what Paul teaches us. Our *agape* love for each other is as close as we will ever come to loving one another as Christ loves us. It is what draws people into our community. Without it, we can never be a truly welcoming, truly faithful, Christian community.

At the end of the service at Beth Israel, Roberta was officially made part of the community through a responsive Prayer for Belonging, which she led. “When I am blessed with joy; when I wonder or ask or despair,” she prayed, and the congregation responded: “We will be there.” “I will give whatever I am able, with willing hands and a full heart,” she said. And the congregation responded, “Each of us has a part that no one else can play, a singular sweet voice with a unique story to tell.” Roberta continued, “And when we open ourselves to one another, the moment grows pregnant with possibilities.” Her new community said back to her, “This is what it means to belong.” I couldn’t help but think that this litany of belonging spoke to what it really means to be part of a community. It’s what Paul wished for the Corinthians. And I’m certain it’s what our Lord wishes for our community of faith, as well.

Last Sunday, we celebrated the marriage of Linda Bailey and Mike DeLorenzo. For those who were unable to be here, please know that your absence was understood and you were missed. And please accept my apology for speaking about how wonderful it was. Of course it was—how could it be anything but wonderful—for Mike and Linda, for this community and their family and friends—to share their special day. But there was something different going on here last Sunday. It was a feeling that permeated the stone walls of this church in a way I’ve not experienced often, but that I wish and pray could be part of our worship each time we gather. That something different going on here was love, shared by everyone here, and the feeling that came from it was joy and hope. Love, joy, and hope. Those are the reasons we come here each week, to experience *and share* Christian love with each other, to experience the joy it brings us, and to leave with hope, transformed by the love of God and the love of our sisters and brothers in Christ, strengthened to live in the world, whatever that brings us.

This, Beloved, is what it means to belong.

*Amen.*